



**Report on the Urban Age Mexico City Symposium on September 4, 2009 in Mexico City by Fionn Petch:**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September the Urban Age Mexico City Symposium was held in the Interactive Museum of Economics (MIDE) in the historic centre of Mexico City. The day-long event was opened with a keynote speech by the Mayor of the Federal District, Marcelo Ebrard. Before an invited audience of national and international urban planners and specialists in various fields, his speech underlined the importance of implementing new measures and new technologies to make better use of increasingly scarce water resources in the city. He also stated that one of his administration's key goals is the improvement in public transport infrastructure, despite resistance from certain sectors. Meanwhile it is hoped the ongoing "We are all pedestrians" campaign will have a positive impact on motorists and society in general.

The mayor's speech – which had the local television media out in force – received a warm welcome from Wolfgang Nowak, director of the AHG, who thanked Ebrard for his contributions to previous forums around the world aimed at improving urban quality of life.

There followed a review of the Urban Age project by its Director, Ricky Burdett, which set in context the aims and scope of the symposium. The first round table discussion was concerned with the Urban Economy, and was opened by an examination by the UNAM's Manuel Perló Cohen of the history of economic crises Mexico City has undergone. Respondents concurred on the importance of establishing new political norms which involve not only public institutions but private enterprise too, with Hans-Joachim Kohlsdorf emphasizing the need to treat companies like naughty children and persuade them to invest in beneficial areas that take advantage of existing export structures, such as motors for electric cars. Former Mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa, pointed out that quality of life in the city is key to attracting and retaining the people who generate GDP. Essential to this quality of life is the provision and use of public space: "the fundamental problem of developing cities is one of sidewalks." He praised Mexico City's Mayor Ebrard for treating pedestrianization as a right, and affirmed that car parking space is "not a constitutional right." Solving such problems is a question of political leadership, and cannot be left to engineers.



The second round table discussion was led by the architect Felipe Leal, Secretary of Urban Development and Housing. He set out the Secretariat's responses to the economic crisis, in terms of simplifying the bureaucratic processes urban building projects currently imply, and creating guarantees for property ownership that encourage people to maintain and value their abodes. Major private investment projects, meanwhile, will no longer be built in isolation from their surroundings, but must consider how workers will travel to a new office block, for example. Permission to build will be conditional on investing in adjoining areas to have a positive overall impact on the city. Leal noted that public space is "the expression of the right to the city," and underlined the importance of artistic interventions to 'domesticate' public space. In a similar vein, Manuel Perló Cohen indicated the relevance of projects such as the "Citámbulos" exhibition on the city at the National Anthropology Museum for restoring people's love for a city and for creating an ability to re-imagine it, a point that was backed up by Sandra Alarcón of the Iberoamericana University in an intervention from the floor.

Respondents also spoke of the need to be more forceful in implementing recommendations, with Adriana Lobo of the Center for Sustainable Transport lamenting the timidity of restrictions placed on cars in the city. Ricky Burdett spoke of the particular challenges faced by Mexico City as a result of being split in two between two major political authorities, and cited the successful creation of a Mayor for all of the city of London as a counterexample. "Without shared visions of what citizens want you can do nothing to change the city in the long term," he affirmed. The UNAM's Peter Krieger also discussed the relevance of the aesthetic appreciation of the city for generating social relationships.

In closing remarks, Ricky Burdett indicated his pleasure at discovering a city with such a vibrant and spontaneous street life, and at having heard so little discussion of problems of violence over the course of the symposium. Inti Muñoz of the Historic Center Trust presented a very positive overview of the latest and forthcoming efforts to improve quality of life in the heart of the city in dialogue with the established population. Finally, Wolfgang Nowak offered a summing-up that focused on the encouraging optimism he had heard from all parties present, in sharp contrast to a tone of pessimism that had predominated at the previous Urban Age Mexico City conference, in 2006.