

La Gran Plaza, Monterrey's *Gran* Attempt at Urban Renewal

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Monterrey, Mexico, like the vast majority of large Latin American cities, has grown prodigiously in the past forty years.¹ From a population of 240,000 in 1943, Mexico's third largest metropolitan area ballooned to nearly 2,500,000 people in 1986. Despite this impressive growth, the older, central portion of the city, known as the *Primer Cuadro*, suffered a loss of population. From a total of 105,504 residents in 1970, the area's numbers fell to 58,419 in 1980, a 45 percent decline (INEDES 1984). The loss in population was accompanied by deterioration and decay in many of the older city blocks.



Figure 1. Morelos Avenue Mall, built in 1977 and extended in later years, Monterrey's first urban renewal project.

The response to central decay in Monterrey paralleled the response of cities in many parts of the world. Urban renewal was championed as the means to cure downtown decline. In 1977, a comparatively modest project, largely paid for by the businessmen involved, created a four block long, outdoor mall on Calle Morelos, one of the principal CBD shopping streets (Figure 1). The street was closed off, store-fronts spruced up, trees planted, benches placed, [end p. 36] and the requisite statue sculpted. The project's relative success led to a block long extension on Calle Morelos in the early 1980s and the addition of several block long segments on intersecting streets to the north and south in the early 1980s. The mall involved a very limited portion of the central city and was primarily a cosmetic operation. In general, the heart of the city continued to decline. And it was a city heart not known for its attractiveness from its beginning.

Monterrey first gained notoriety as a city of heavy industry, with some of its largest factories located nearly adjacent to the city's commercial core. Many of these venerable factories still function, so that particulate matter from their smokestacks settles all over the city, but most thickly in the older central city. Most buildings here carry a thick layer of grime. What were once bright neon signs now loom faded and dull. Dinginess oozes from every corner. As one Mexican magazine put it, "Although it has been given cosmetic treatment, Monterrey continues to be incurably ugly" (*Contenido*, Octubre 1983, p. 32). A mall would not suffice.

Into this problematic environment strode Alfonso Martínez Domínguez, installed in 1979 as governor of Nuevo León (the state of which Monterrey is the capital). An action-oriented politician, he brought a new vision of what he thought could be done with the central city. Having seen Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, begin an impressive central city renewal project in the late 1970s, he decided that Monterrey could do the same. In November 1980 he announced a massive clearance and redevelopment project called the Gran Plaza (immediately dubbed "La Macroplaza" by the local press), which he said would act as a detonator, a spark, for reinvigorating the rest of the city's commercial core. Within three months of his announcement, streets closed, old buildings began to crumble, and trenches appeared. Clearance and redevelopment had come to Monterrey.

The Gran Plaza case provides a vivid example of urban renewal in Mexico, where, as elsewhere, central urban decay served as the apparent principal motivation to undertake a massive public work. The process by which the project was carried out, however, varied considerably from urban renewal in countries such as the United States. The intent of this paper is to illuminate the Mexican urban renewal process by examining the Gran Plaza Project, its legal basis, its means of financing, its impact on occupants of the renewed area, and to offer some measure of its success or lack thereof through 1984. Special emphasis is placed on the centralized personal power of the governor and his singular role in effecting this massive landscape change in Monterrey's core. In contrast to many urban renewal projects in the United States, attention to legal niceties, detailed planning, extensive public discussion, and drawn out land expropriation proceedings were tossed aside. In Mexico, a governor has six years in office to originate, implement, and complete any program. He does not worry much about finishing projects undertaken by his predecessor, and he knows his successor will treat him in the same fashion. A governor who wants to leave his mark on the land must finish his work while in office. As this study demonstrates, the authoritarian powers the governor possesses compensate for the time restriction; he can accomplish much in a relatively short space of time.

An Outline of the Proposed Project

For the Gran Plaza project the governor decided to level most of a thirty block area that occupied forty hectares in the Primer Cuadro portion of the central city. The area included three rows of blocks running from north to south (Figure 2). The governor's plan for reconstructing the area was conceptually simple. At the northern and southern extremes of the central row of blocks sat the state capitol and the city hall, respectively. Between these two seats of governmental power the governor planned a massive central plaza. New utility networks would be installed in the two rows of blocks on either side of the plaza, and the bulk of the land would be sold to titans of Monterrey industry and commerce to construct office building monuments that would appropriately reflect the enterprising character of this business-oriented city (Figure 2). No building lower than ten stories would be permitted. A few blocks fronting the plaza would be reserved, however, for public buildings such as an ornate and ultra-modern cultural center, a library, a state legislative building, and a government office structure. Three thousand parking spaces would be built under the central plaza, part of which would be elevated above ground level, and each high rise would also have parking underground (Gobierno del Estado de Nuevo León 1980).

The 465 irregularly shaped properties of the pre-renewal territory, spread among some 350 owners, would be combined into a limited number of block and half-block parcels, although 35 holdings and their structures would be preserved. The bulk of the buildings marked for preservation stood on the southwestern blocks of the plan and formed the eastern end of the CBD. To the north, a twenty-seven story office tower (Figure 3), the city's tallest, sited on J. I. Ramón Avenue, also would remain, as would a large church, and inexplicably, a nondescript old commercial building. The one token to historic preservation, other than the obvious government structures, the cathedral, and one or two [end p. 37] business buildings, was a tiny church constructed in the 1830s on Matamoros Avenue. Everything else, including a stately old movie theater and a recently constructed seven story business building, would go.

The Project Area

All the principal powers, both heavenly and earthly, were nestled within the project area; these included city hall, the state capitol, the federal building, the courthouse, and the city's cathedral (Figure 2). The Casino Monterrey, one of the metropolitan area's most exclusive social clubs, was located there, too. But, in general, the renewal zone was old Monterrey, composed of predominantly low-slung buildings dating from the early twentieth century or even earlier. Narrow streets, built for the pre-automobile era, criss-crossed the area in grid fashion. In most of the zone little voluntary rehabilitation was occurring, rents were frozen, decay had set in, and crime was rising.

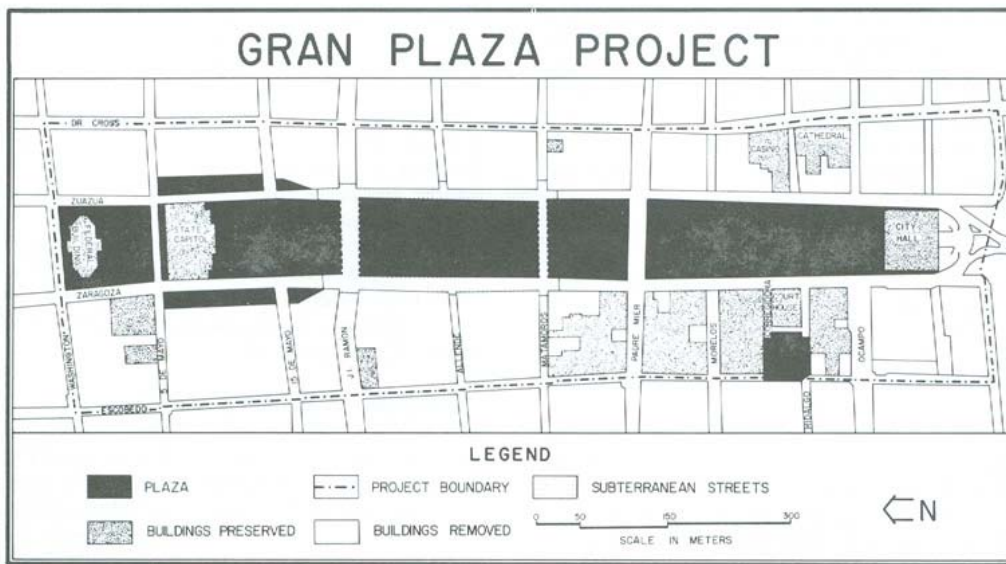


Fig. 2. The Gran Plaza Project, indicating buildings that were retained and areas that were cleared.



Fig. 3. One of the buildings retained inside the project boundaries, the Latino Tower (on the right, Monterey's tallest building), and a government office tower under construction, an edifice not part of the project plan. In the foreground, an example of the vacant stretches that still prevail on many of the project's blocks.

Land Use

Mixed land use characterized the project territory, but commercial operations occupied more land than any other use category (Table 1). The project boundaries incorporated the eastern end of the Central Business District and adjacent residential neighborhoods that were being converted to commercial uses. The 270 business establishments, two-thirds of which occupied rented facilities, were generally small, individual or family operations, with few or no outside employees.² However, some larger scale enterprises also were scattered about the area.

Nearly a third of the buildings served as residential units that housed approximately 340 families, 80 percent of them renters. The turn-of-the-century residences were generally individual units, some of which had been converted into multi-unit dwellings. At least one *vecindad* (central city slum) had appeared, but modern houses and apartment buildings were completely absent. The residents' socio-economic standing ranged from low to middle class. Office space, both professional and government, [end p. 38] was widespread. Nearly 100 private professionals occupied facilities here, but they covered limited amounts of land area. Like their merchant brethren, their enterprises were small scale operations. On the hand, government office space was more important in total area than as a percentage of units because of the large areal expanse of many public buildings.

Table 1. Land use in the project area.

Use	Number of Units*	Percent of Units
Commercial	240	42
Residential	170	30
Professional Offices	76	13
Parking Lots	22	6
Government Offices	16	3
Vacant	13	2
Educational Institutions	9	2
Parking Garages	7	1
Churches	3	1
Under Construction	2	<1
Recreation	2	<2
Total	571	100

*These figures are *ground level appearances* of a particular use. The total number of housing units is actually greater because of upper floor apartments. The same is true for some of the other categories, so that figures in the text may vary from those in this table (adapted from map prepared by PROURBE 1980).

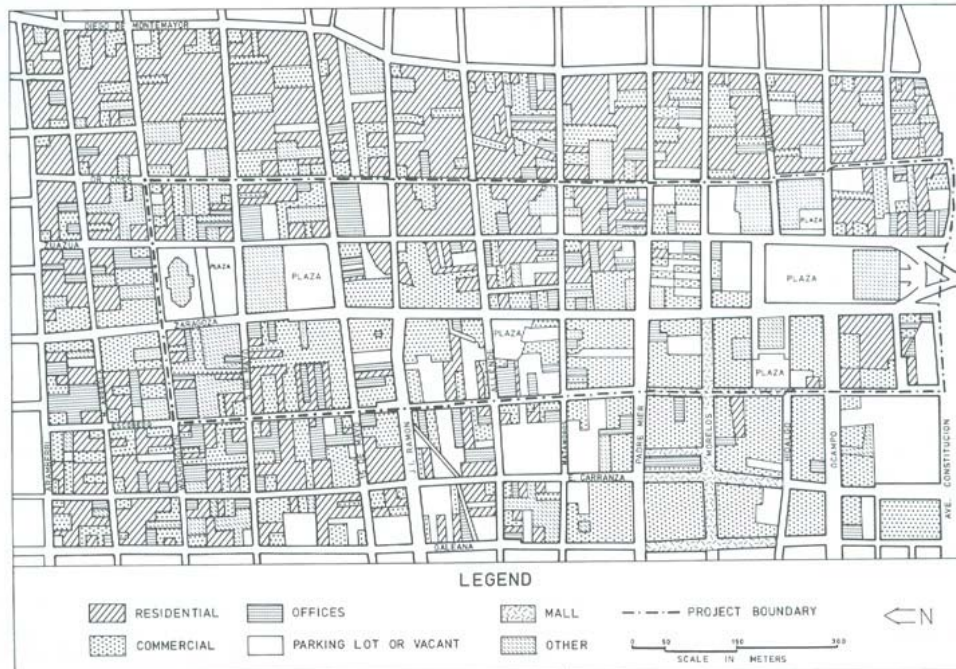


Fig. 4 Land use in the Gran Plaza Project area and adjacent blocks, prior to initiation of the work.

The large number of vacant lots and parking lots provided indicators of the age and general decline of this part of the city. Virtually all of the 33 parking lots were vacant parcels that had been converted to parking uses.

Distinctive land uses predominated in different parts of the project area (Figure 4). The western row of blocks was thoroughly commercial, with some blocks (those within the CBD) completely devoid of houses or apartments. In contrast, parts of the eastern row of blocks were largely residential. The central row of blocks exhibited more mixed use, with considerable variation from one block to another.

Financing the Gran Plaza

The announcement of the Gran Plaza project was not well received in all quarters. Merchants and residents of the affected area complained loudly. The Chamber of Commerce needed cajoling. To [end p. 39] win people over to his point of view, the governor advertised one particularly attractive selling point. The plaza would not cost the public a single peso-- the project would pay for itself!

Two sources were to provide Gran Plaza funding. Roughly one-third of the funds would be acquired through the sale of improved land within the plaza project. The land would be bought from its owners at its commercial value of the day, and with project improvements, and simply the presence of the project itself, the property would increase greatly in value, thus paying many of the bills--a standard technique in many urban renewal projects. The second source of funding would be provided by an "Increased Property Value Tax" (IPVT), and would purportedly raise 40 to 65 percent of the needed cash. The government would apply this tax to properties for sale within the project and to parcels within one or two blocks of the project boundaries. Presumably the properties in this peripheral area would benefit greatly from the redevelopment carried out in the Gran Plaza, increasing their net worth substantially. Since the owners of these properties would have done nothing to increase the value of their properties, the government considered it only fair that the property owners pay a one-time tax (the IPVT) on this un-earned increment. To say the least, the IPVT created controversy. Occupants of the taxed area asked how the project could claim to be self-financing when landowners in the areas surrounding the project were being assessed two-thirds of its costs!

Implementation and Legal Basis

Over the past 35 years, city after city in the United States has pursued urban renewal projects in which private lands were acquired by the government for redevelopment. Some of the acquired land might be utilized for new government buildings, but most was improved and resold to private parties, with one of the goals of urban renewal to increase the property tax yield of the selected area by attracting "higher" uses that would produce more tax revenue. In Mexico, in contrast, prior to the passage of the General Law of Human Settlements (*Ley General de Asentamientos Humanos*) by the federal government in 1976, the government could only expropriate property that was to be used directly by the government. No land could be taken from private parties and then resold to private parties. Land acquired by the government had to be used for government buildings, public plazas, or other public uses. As the director of Monterrey's urban renewal agency noted, "it was impossible to expropriate even one square centimeter more than was necessary for a public work" (*Constru Noticias*, November 1982, p. 35). In other words, the Gran Plaza project would not have been possible before 1976.

In February 1980, passage of the Urban Development Law for the State of Nuevo León (*Ley de Desarrollo Urbana para el Estado de Nuevo León*), which was based on the 1976 federal law, provided the necessary legislation to carry out urban renewal projects in the state of Nuevo León. And it was the state government, not the municipal government, that developed and carried out the Gran Plaza project, even though the work lies completely within the city limits of one municipality--Monterrey.³

In order to redevelop forty hectares of private property in the central city, the state government needed to acquire the land, level existing structures, install utility improvements, modernize the street and traffic arrangements, build the public portion of the project, and sell back to the private sector the developable plots reserved for the new high rises. The process for achieving the goals of this kind of undertaking in the United States is time-consuming. Public support must be mounted, land acquisition may proceed leisurely, environmental impact reports must be debated and construction contracts must be put out to bid. In Monterrey, however, the initial phases of the Gran Plaza moved very quickly because of the authoritarian nature of the state government and its ability to ignore certain aspects of law.

The governor and his staff apparently conceived the plaza idea during his election campaign in 1979. When he took office later that year he immediately began to move on the project. He had architecture students at the state Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León gather data and take photographs of the area. A Texas architectural firm was hired to make a general study of a potential renewal zone, and a Mexico City consulting group was then hired to design a plan for the project (Garza Guerra, February 29, 1984, pers. comm., and Cortes Melo, May 30, 1984, pers. comm.). In November 1980 a pamphlet describing the project was published by the state government (Gobierno del Estado de Nuevo León 1980). In November 1981 the state legislature passed, and the governor signed, a bill authorizing the Gran Plaza.

Legal authorization was mere symbolism, however, for Martínez Domínguez. He had stated ten months earlier, in January 1981, that the plaza "was a fact" (*El Norte*, January 29, p. B1). And it was-- even if it was not yet legal. Land acquisition, resident and business relocation, and building demolition began well before the legal foundation was set.

Martínez Domínguez created a semi-autonomous state agency, PROURBE, similar to a city urban renewal agency in the United States, to carry out [end p. 40] the project. (PROURBE was reported functioning in March 1981 but was not officially established until the publication of a state decree in May of that year.) Property was acquired rapidly. Residents, merchants, and professionals were forced out of their premises. In April 1981 the first four families were moved out of the project area to other housing (*El Norte*, May 1, 1981, p. B 1). Demolition soon followed. The process moved with such speed that by November 4, 1981, PROURBE's general director reported that the majority of the area's properties had been purchased, and about half of the merchants and families had been dislodged from the project area (*El Norte*, November 4, 1981, p. B 14). Plans for the Gran Plaza, approved or not, moved forward. Then, on November 27, 1981, the plaza project was provided legitimacy with the publication of the State Government Decree 156 (*Periódico Oficial del Estado de Nuevo León*, November 27, 1981). The State Congress, however, did not receive the proposal for the plaza for its study and approval until mid-November!

Impact on Occupants of the Project Area

In virtually any urban renewal project of the "clearance and redevelopment" type, one of the key issues for all concerned is the fate of those who are dislodged. Basically, in the Gran Plaza case the government planned to find new housing for renters, allow homeowners to shift themselves, and offer modest assistance to businesses. The governor assured all of them a square deal.

Properties will be purchased at their commercial value. This is just. Those affected can be absolutely assured that there will be no injustices and that no injustices will be tolerated. Neither will we permit certain opportunists, painful exceptions to the majority of persons, to obstruct the process in order to obtain privileges and advantages not available to others.

Those of modest resources who are renting residences can rest assured that the government will provide them with preferential privileges so that they may acquire built houses in the state housing programs on terms that involve a very low down payment, interest lower than 10 percent per year, and terms over ten or fifteen years. With the responsible counseling of the Chamber of Commerce, the merchants of the area will be provided with fiscal stimuli and flexible mechanisms so that their relocation does not affect their legitimate interests. Intelligently, all of those who by the nature of their business are able to, and want to integrate themselves into the project have, and will have preference (Martínez Domínguez, 1981, p. 100).

The government, in fact, did carry out its promise to relocate residential renters.⁴ By providing them with low cost loans in various government housing projects around the city (attempting to match the resources of a given family with the costs in a particular housing development) the government enabled the renters to become homeowners. Many actually found their circumstances improved in their new confines. Through the PRI, the governing political party, the government also provided the residents with free moves to their new sites. So proud was the government of its record here that renewal agency officials claimed that the process was carried out "in such a way that at no time could you talk about 'those affected' but, on the contrary, about 'those benefited' by the procedure" (*Constru Nooticias*, November 1983, p. 14).

The government left to their own resources those who owned housing in the plaza, since it was presumed that the amount paid to those families for their plaza houses would enable them to make purchases elsewhere. No information exists to determine the fate of these plaza area residents.

Merchants and professionals generally found the relocation process costly. The government promised to assist in finding new business sites for those affected, offered to provide them with free moves, and paid them an indemnity that varied according to the size of the business. The government appears to have done very little to aid merchants in locating new quarters, but did follow through on its offer to move them. Most business people apparently refused because of the fear of theft and other problems during the moving process. The government did indemnify businesses, in the range of Mex\$25,000 to Mex\$50,000. When the moves first began this total represented \$1,000 US to \$2,000 US, but by the end of 1982 the maximum figure represented less than \$500 US. No matter, the government did not adjust for inflation. This situation caused grief for many of the affected because in Monterrey a merchant customarily pays a *guante*, a fee for the right to rent a particular space when first entering that space. Businesses that found new locations had to pay *guantes* in excess of their indemnities, in addition to the costs of remodeling their new locations for new uses. Many businesses did not survive the move, although it is impossible to say how many since the government kept no records (or at least did not make such records available to the public) of what happened to merchants and professionals who were evicted.

The people most seriously affected by the Gran Plaza redevelopment, however, were those who occupied the blocks immediately surrounding the project. Not only did they have to pay for the bulk of the project through IPVT, but the tax was applied at a most inopportune time. The government began to collect this assessment during the first half of 1982, in the midst of the process of razing buildings and the creation of a new infrastructure. No possible benefits, but instead, considerable inconveniences [end p. 41] had accrued to the landowners in the IPVT zone at this point. The landowners were given three years to pay the tax, but even after two years (July 1984) the street network in the plaza was not complete, properties that fronted on the plaza were often covered with construction debris, and neighboring streets were alternately closed and opened. The vast majority of businesses fronting on the project itself lost most of their customer flow during this period because of the traffic interruptions and the difficulty of access.

Another controversial part of the special tax was that it was applied in an area that, although the land use is highly variable, is more residential (51 percent) than anything else (Figure 4). The government recognized that the benefits of the renewal project would be greater for those closest to the work so that the highest taxes in the periphery were applied along the edge of the renewal zone, with the rate declining toward the outer limits of the taxed area. But in a district marked by variable land use, distance from the plaza was clearly not the only determinant of site worth. For residences on the east side of the project the tax struck much more heavily than for commercial areas in the core of the CBD on the west side of the Gran Plaza. A 600 square meter lot occupied by a house faced a potential tax exceeding Mex\$2,000,000, an extremely stiff tariff for an old residential property. The imposition of this tax forced many landowners on the eastern border of the plaza to sell their properties (Garza Guerra, June 26, 1984, pers. comm.). Many of the buildings on these properties have been razed, others abandoned.

Forced evacuation thus spread beyond the limits of the plaza. Renters and businesses in the taxed area were not beneficiaries of any government programs to assist them in moving when it became necessary, because they were beyond the boundaries of the project itself. They had to find other quarters on their own and have been more seriously affected than the population within the project boundaries. The properties in the taxed area will increase in value as a result of the Gran Plaza, so that the idea of paying a price for this "unearned increment" is not out of order. Justice would have been served much better, however, if the tax had been applied after project completion. Land speculators, many reputed to be friends of the governor, were the principal beneficiaries of this process.

Measuring the Project's Success

The Gran Plaza in Monterrey was conceived during what was perhaps Mexico's era of greatest economic prosperity. The late 1970s witnessed a flow of capital into Mexico in quantities never seen previously. Oil revenues and bank loans produced a high economy in the country, particularly compared to previous years. Many who had only dreamed of owning an automobile were now able to purchase one. The middle class began to accumulate true acquisitive power. The wealthy built condominiums in the United States, and politicians dreamed of glorious projects that would enable them to leave a lasting signature on the fiefdoms they controlled. Martínez Domínguez' Gran Plaza fit the mood of the times. Future city historians would remember him as the one who finally made Monterrey look like the big city it was, the one who created beauty where unsightliness reigned. And he could also line his pockets in the meantime (as many Mexican politicians were doing throughout the country) through land transactions in the project area and via his connections with concrete companies and construction contractors.

Unfortunately, the grave economic crisis that still plagues Mexico struck in late 1982 and created substantial difficulties for the governor and his Gran Plaza plans. Building destruction and relocation of project area occupants was already well underway, but nothing had been built yet when the crisis hit. Crisis or no crisis, the governor remained undeterred. No economic disaster would affect his monument to Monterrey (he said).

The Central plaza portion of the project moved forward, portions of it elevated above the adjacent street level, where vegetation, walkways, and a sumptuous fountain provided decoration. Nine hundred parking spaces, more than 2,000 fewer than the governor had promised, were laid out under the central row of blocks to help relieve a major downtown parking problem. The plaza was finished in the last half of 1984.

The new public buildings planned for the project, a City Theater and a new State Legislature building, have also been constructed, although the theater was scaled down considerably from its initially planned opulence. New utilities were laid out under the project area and streets were realigned or removed where necessary. Those that remained were repaved.

Where the governor planned the two great rows of high rises on either side of the central plaza, only strips of dusty, vacant lots stand (Figure 3). By mid-1984, only three properties had been sold to private parties, and they had been purchased in 1981 before the economic crisis. No private structures had been built. Companies that purchased land in 1981 were unable to follow through on building plans the next year. Other companies that were considering land purchases and building construction when the project was announced discovered they could not even buy the land parcels, much less undertake building construction,

[end p. 42]

Trying to modify the appearance of desolation, and, not so incidentally, using state money that he had promised would not be used, the governor decided to build some additional government office space. Two administrative towers to house state government bureaus and a state archive building were under construction by mid-1984. The governor also enticed a federal housing agency to occupy and rebuild one of the structures that remained on the west side of the project area. To encourage more private building and lot purchases the government responded in at least two additional ways. Building height limitations were removed. The announced ten-story lower limit is gone and buildings will now be negotiated individually with respect to height. Additionally, PROURBE became more flexible in the lot sizes it was willing to sell. Smaller parcels than planned became available by early 1984, opening up the area to more potential buyers. The governor moved quickly on these fronts: his term of office was going to end in 1985 and he wanted to leave as positive a physical legacy as possible.

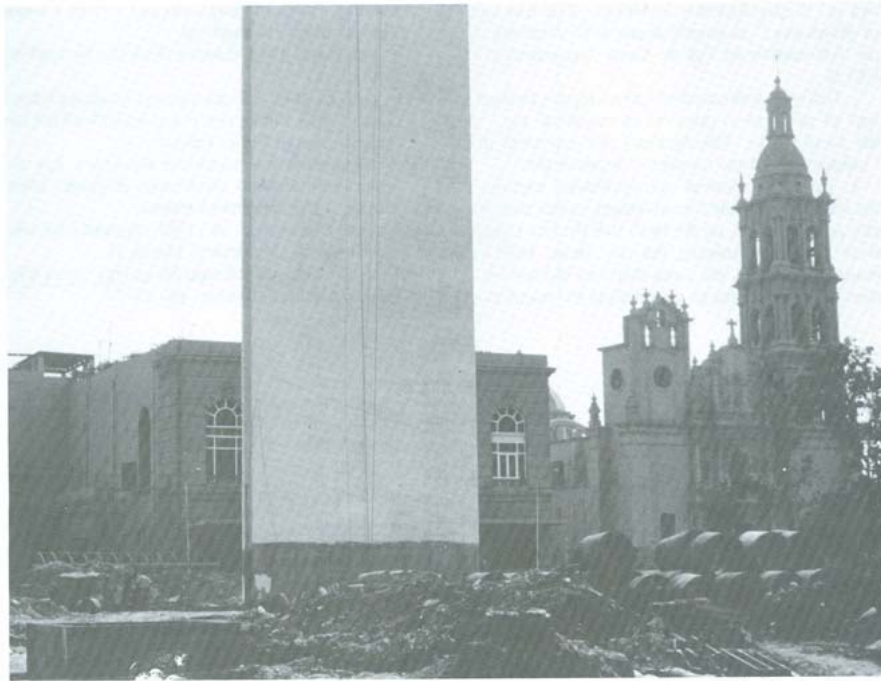


Fig. 5. In the foreground, "El Faro," the 70-meter high monolith (not shown in its totality) erected at the southern end of the plaza, with the Casino Monterrey and the Cathedral in the background.

Monterrey's central park remains surrounded more by desert than concrete, and the city's reputation for unattractiveness remains. Property prices are high, with equally attractive, but less expensive sites available in other parts of the city. The city's large corporations remain in difficult financial circumstances, and most will not invest in new buildings in the near future.

One finished structure that stands astride the southern portion of the central plaza and blocks views in all directions is a 70-m tall concrete slab (Figure 5), donated by the Chamber of Commerce, and painted an obtrusive Halloween orange. In typical Monterrey style, this monstrosity is advertised as the tallest "sculpture" in northern Mexico and is topped by giant lights. This light does little, however, to brighten the results of Martínez Domínguez' Gran Plaza project. Unfortunately, Monterrey is now adorned with a large new plaza, city theater, new state legislature building, and concrete monolith, all surrounded by an urban void where the governor imagined high rises. It is as though one of Cinderella's ugly sisters went in for plastic [end p. 43] surgery and came out with her nose and ears completely removed. Some of the ugliness might be gone, but the homely sister, and Monterrey, look a little strange minus the missing parts. While Monterrey gained a large attractive open space in the middle of the city, the other outcomes were unforeseen in the heady days of "Petrolandia." Only time will prove whether the governor's vision was worth an extended period of vacant lots, blowing sand, and considerable public debt.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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NOTES

1. Portions of this paper were contained in "Urban Renewal in Monterrey, Mexico," delivered at the 1984 meeting of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers at the University of Ottawa, and in "Urban Renewal in Mexico: The Example of Monterrey," delivered at the 1985 meetings of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers at UCLA.

2. Different sources cited various figures for numbers of businesses, numbers of residents, etc., in the project area. The figures I use represent my "consensus" of the numbers I encountered.

3. An urban renewal agency official explained the state government's involvement, rather than the city government's, on the basis that the city fathers were kept busy keeping the city clean, building roads and bridges, etc., and that they did not have time or resources for an undertaking the magnitude (García Guerra, February 29, 1984, pers. comm.).

4. Statements concerning the impact of the project on residents and businesses within the Gran Plaza area are based on interviews with affected residents, businessmen, government officials, and community leaders conducted in Monterrey in 1984. The results of this part of the study are reported more fully in "The Urban Renewal Process in the Gran Plaza, Monterrey," unpublished.

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