

ELEMENTS FOR THE ANALYSIS
OF THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE
OF MEXICO CITY
A Typology of Dwellings

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This address to the Seminar discussed the social and cultural aspects of dwellings in urban life in Mexico City during the early nineteenth century. The studies were based on information obtained from the national census of 1811. After a brief review of the census papers, the following were offered as the major obstacles to interpreting the information contained:

1. The designation of dwellings as "houses" or "rooms" clearly corresponded to the criteria of the time period in which the census was conducted, and to the judgement of the census taker. What was a "room" to one may have been a "house" to another; what may have been considered a "room" in 1811, may be classified as a "house" today.

2. There were many gaps in the information recorded in the census which frequently referred only to the location of the building, without mention of its physical structure or purpose.

A terminology was established to describe the dwellings under study. The term *vivienda* was used for buildings occupied by people from higher income groups. To determine whether a building was a *vivienda*, information on the ethnic and economic background of the individuals who inhabited it was consulted. For example, a building belonging to a peninsular Spanish family with servants was registered as a *vivienda*, while the dwelling of an Indian factory worker was considered a room, or *cuarto*. The following guidelines were proposed for studying urban dwellings in early nineteenth-century Mexico City:

1. Type of House: Defined by the grouping of rooms within the house. Certain houses were constructed to be more social than physical (e.g., an apartment complex) while others were more physical than social (e.g., the home of a wealthy merchant).

2. Condition of House.

3. Services Available in Dwelling.

4. Number of Unoccupied Rooms in Dwelling.

This data would enable detection of changes in the evolution of the concepts of vivienda and cuarto and changes in the use of the buildings themselves. For example, a vivienda in 1811 may have been classified as a cuarto in a later census. Or, a vivienda which belonged to an upper class family in 1811 may later have served as an apartment complex housing several lower class families.

The demographic statistics of this census reveal a relatively low population density per square meter in Mexico City, but the density per dwelling and per room was extremely high. It was also discovered that the city consisted of numerous independent nuclei, or zones, each isolated from the others. There were areas where the physical concentration of buildings was very high or very low. The buildings in these areas usually corresponded to independent structures occupied by individual families, or to commercial buildings not necessarily destined for living purposes. There were also areas in which the buildings were divided into many rooms, and which were inhabited by middle class families. The following conclusions were drawn from detailed study of the physical concentration of buildings: The smaller the number of individual houses, the greater the number of rooms; and the greater the number of rooms, the smaller the number of people. This, then, meant that the greatest concentration of people lived in areas where the houses were not subdivided into many rooms. The areas of high physical concentration of buildings corresponded to the lowest population density. It was also noted that there were areas in which buildings and people tended to be concentrated; these areas were dispersed unevenly throughout the city and were mutually independent. There was no radical concentration of people in the center of the city.

There are difficulties in correlating data on housing with data on social structure in the city. For example, if we take the general information contained in the census of 1811 and classify the population according to the type of house they lived in, the result is that 50.5 percent of the urban population of Mexico City belonged to the middle and upper classes, while only 23.3 percent belonged to the lower-middle and lower classes. The characteristic houses of each economic class were evenly distributed with no apparent "zonal segregation" in Mexico City in 1811. The houses of the wealthy and those of the poor were scattered throughout the urban area. Nevertheless, the social differentiation appears within the housing unit itself. There are significant social differences between those who inhabit a house and those who live in a room of the same building.