

The Guardian

The Mexico City earthquake, 30 years on: have the lessons been forgotten? David Adler.
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The devastation of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake was swift. In just over a minute – in the early hours of 19 September, while the city was still asleep – 100,000 houses crumbled, 5,000 people died and roughly five million residents were left without electricity or potable water. On the Televisa broadcast that morning, newscaster Lourdes Guerrero maintained her smile as the room around her began to move. “It is still shaking a little,” she said into the camera. “But we must remain calm. We will wait a second so that we can continue talking.” The feed cut to static.

Just a few blocks away, the historic city centre, or El Centro, was in pieces. Cathedrals, hospitals, museums and other monuments to Mexican history were destroyed. The Hotel Regis, once the neoclassical centrepiece of the downtown area, was all rubble and ash.

Situated between three large tectonic plates, Mexico is a seismological nightmare. Mexico City is its most vulnerable city, built as it is on a sinking lake bed. With a magnitude of 8.1, the 1985 earthquake pushed Mexico far past its breaking point.

The earthquake

In 1985, Mexico City was the world’s largest urban area. With more than 16 million residents, the city had been growing at a ludicrous rate – over 4% annually through the 1970s, with a growth rate of close to 40% in the city’s periphery. Its economic boom, known as the Mexican Miracle, encouraged heavy migration, and few politicians were eager to stem the flow of incoming labour with strict building codes or regulations. As a result, informal settlements exploded across the city, from expanding tenements in the city centre to makeshift structures along its outer rings.

The earthquake revealed the precarity of Mexico City life. Residents of the city’s informal settlements were already travelling long distances each day to reach work. And they were struggling to find water at home. Their fragile routines collapsed in the earthquake. Public transportation halted, water pipes burst and public health facilities – few of which were built to code – crumbled.

In the days that followed, the ruling-party, PRI, struggled to provide emergency services. While many Mexican residents were still trapped in the rubble, President Miguel de la Madrid focused instead on managing the PR crisis. He did not speak publicly for two days, ordering a media blackout to prevent coverage of the earthquake. When he did speak publicly, he downplayed the death toll and rejected international aid in favour of a PRI-led emergency effort. That effort reached few survivors, focusing almost exclusively on distributing services to loyal PRI supporters.

This wasn’t surprising in the context of Mexican political culture. But in the widespread devastation of the earthquake – with the international community paying close attention – they appeared excessively corrupt. Resistance to the PRI and its single-party rule had been growing since the 1960s. Their post-earthquake fumbling merely offered the occasion for a broader swath of Mexican society to join the movement.

The decades since

In the three decades since, reconstruction efforts have expanded. The city centre – whose historic buildings were hit hard by the earthquake – has been completely remodelled. In 2002, the city government launched a public-private partnership with Carlos Slim's nonprofit foundation, Fundación del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de Mexico, to funnel resources into the downtown area. Together with a wave of private investment, the project has installed a new telecommunications infrastructure, renovated old properties and constructed new pedestrian malls.

Meanwhile, the government has made major **strides** in earthquake preparedness. They have established monitoring systems to detect earthquakes before they arrive, new agencies to coordinate responses to a potential earthquake and they have raised crucial funds in case of future emergency. When a 7.4-magnitude quake hit in March 2012, the city was well-prepared, initiating its six-point emergency plan and evacuating public buildings. There were no casualties.

Yet these improvements have been limited, by and large, to the city's central areas. As the epicentre of the 1985 earthquake, this region became the most active site of grassroots mobilisation and, in turn, reconstruction funding.

Conclusion

In their destruction, earthquakes expose more than the physical foundations of the city. They also expose its social and political foundations. In the case of Mexico City, the 1985 earthquake revealed the government's disregard for the plight of the urban poor. Thirty years later, though, that plight remains.

To learn from the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, then, will require more than reconstruction or regulation. If much of the damage of the earthquake was caused by dangerous, informal construction, then the government must address directly the reasons why residents resort to these construction methods – displacement, poverty and inequality. To address these, the city must first discard its zero-tolerance approach to work proactively with its low-income communities to develop infrastructure, services and homes that are safe for residents in the long term. And it must protect its residents from the rising property prices that displace them from the centre and give rise to vulnerable settlements in the first place.

tectonic	relating to the structure of the earth's surface 지각:지구 표면의 구조와 관련 地壳:与地球表面的结构有关
seismological	connected with the scientific study of earthquakes 지진학 地震学
ludicrous	unreasonable; that you cannot take seriously 우스꽝스러운 荒谬
precarity	the state of not being safe or certain 岌岌可危 위태로움
fumbling	hesitating or uncertain 口吃:犹豫或不确定 더듬거림: 망설이거나 불확실함
stride	to walk with long steps in a particular direction 步幅:在特定方向上以长步幅行走 보폭