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DIA DE MUERTOS

Nowhere in the world do the dead receive such a warm welcome as in Mexico. At the end of October and beginning of November, Mexicans welcome back their deceased into the family circle. Far from being a somber occasion, Day of the Dead is the one occasion each year when the dead are beckoned directly with earthly pleasures—be that mezcal or mole. For the family welcoming back departed relatives, the ceremony is both a pleasure and a duty.

The scenes at the cemeteries are magical. Vivid orange and yel-

low cempasuchiles, or marigolds, decorate the tombstones and crosses illuminated at night by thousands of small candles. Made mystical by the blue smoke and scent of the burning copal, both the flowers and the incense carry important symbolism and serve to lead the dead to the realm of the living. Entire families in their Sunday best crowd family tombs with offerings of food, alcohol, snacks, photos and books. It is a full-blown family reunion and many take their evening meal, picnic style, on the tombs, sharing with the dead.

“It is a distinctly Mexican occasion, and the country vigorously embraces its dead during these days as it drinks, sings and dances with them.”

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Music and dancing are a huge part of the festivities - people have even been known to bring bands of mariachis to the graves.

The Mexican Day of the Dead celebration is a blend of cultural traditions. The holiday has roots in pre-Hispanic cult of death traditions, the veneration of ancestors practiced by indigenous peoples and Spanish pagan groups, and the commemoration of Catholic All Saints Day. Ultimately though, it is a distinctly Mexican occasion, and the country vigorously embraces its dead during these days as it drinks, sings and dances with them.

The most ostentatious festivity of the year - more exuberant than either Easter or Christmas, Day of the dead illustrates the special relationship that Mexico has with death. It is a laughing, mocking familiarity that is embodied in the portrayal of grinning paper mache skeletons performing life's everyday tasks. Dancing on someone's grave, an action that carries such negative connotations in the

rest of the Christian world, represents a reaching out of the living to the dead.

At heart, the Day of the Dead is a family affair and much of the ceremony takes place indoors, within the inner-sanctum of the family circle. This is the authentic Mexican Day of the Dead, a sight few foreigners see. On October 31, families build an ofrenda, or offering altar. Typically the altar consists of an arch made of reed or corn husks, placed on a table and decorated with flowers, fruit, bread, tins filled with sugar and decorative tissues or paper. Figures of patron saints, candles and pictures of the deceased occupy the center of the altar.

Then come the earthly pleasures - rich helpings of food are set out at the altar for the arrival of the deceased guests, who come in order of sacredness. The first to arrive are the souls of dead children, or angelitos, on November 1 around noon. The adults visit at the end of the afternoon on November 2. Glasses of water are left on the altar as refreshment after their long journey.

Naturally, food plays a central role. For breakfast, Oaxacan families often eat tamales de mole, and for lunch chicken is served with rich, spicy mole sauce and rice. In some parts of Mexico, tables are set for the entire family, including empty chairs for the ancestors. In their brief return to the realm of the living, the dead eat and drink whatever they please.

Adults are offered all their old favorites, as well as cigarettes and mezcals if they were known to partake. Candy, soda, even junk food is brought for the angelitos. The dead, whose presence is felt throughout the celebrations, are thought to consume the essence of the meal and presents laid before them, leaving positive energy as they depart again. After the feast, the altar food is generously shared among relatives, neighbors and friends. The style and form of the celebration varies greatly throughout the country, between social classes, ethnic groups, and even village to village.

In many rural and indigenous parts, people view the Dia de Muertos ceremonies as an obligation (with dire consequences for those who fail to attend) and a private matter. In larger towns and cities like Oaxaca open and public displays of revelry abound, in some cases emphasized for the curious tourist population. Elaborate, costumed processions take place with music, singing and dancing. Weeks beforehand, shop windows are decorated with paper skeletons and skulls. In the second half of October, markets sell different merchandise including wax, incense, paper decorations, candy skulls, special bread, mole, fruit, nuts, tin work, and pottery. Generally, no expense is spared as people honor the dead and attempt to outdo their neighbors.



CaSa's sustainable landscape architecture uses water from local streams.



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SAVE OUR TREES:

The Struggle for Cerro Del Fortín, a Historic Symbol Of Oaxaca!

A Public Park, a Parking lot and A crisis in el Cerro del Fortin



By CP Cassidy

Walking towards the sunrise last Tuesday morning I suffered a shock that cramped my stomach and kept me uptight all day.

My daily routine begins with a long walk with the dog through the city of Oaxaca. We have walked up and down the streets and have found only one last place near the city center with an almost unobstructed view of the mountains. It's the track and soccer fields behind the Panteón General called la Unidad Deportiva Venustiano Carranza in Ixcotel. Well, last Monday, without putting up any warning to the daily users, they fenced off in black plastic, the last remaining open space where runners, walkers, dogs could run without a leash, soccer teams practiced and had their games on week-ends. The covered the fence darkened my mood and of many others, for days there were far fewer runners on the remaining

track. Apparently Oaxaca will finally be walled in on all sides and we will only get to see bits of sky at a time.

I realize that in any growing city urban planning in nearly impossible. It is not so much a question of logic and logistics, as commercial interests. But when any kind of building goes on, the need for city parks and open spaces should always be factored in. Somehow that is not happening in our beloved Oaxaca nachelli (beloved in Zapoteco).

The only other unobstructed place to walk to, is definitely the Cerro del Fortin, one of my favorite places in the city.

It's rainy season in Oaxaca, and from the top of the Fortin watching day break is breathing. The mists hovering over the Tule and clouds clinging to the majestic dark mass of San Felipe to the north. The first rays of light coming through the guajes, from which Oaxaca derives its name, and the

jacarandas that crown this relatively unscathed bit of nature.

It's wonderful to pass friendly runners and dog walkers who wish you, 'Buen día'. The passers-by often walk in groups and it's lovely to see all three generations of women getting their daily constitutional together. It's a gorgeous place to watch the entire Valle de Oaxaca light up progressively.

Well the Fortin is in crisis. One fact that cannot be ignored.

Here's the situation. For years the government, the tourism industry and the business community have been planning to build a Convention Center.

There was general agreement that it would attract visitors all year long and create jobs.

In 2009 the idea was to build the Convention Center near the International Airport.

In 2011 an architect was hired to look for right place to build the center. Which by now was referred to as the Centro Cultural y de Convenciones de Oaxaca, or CCCO. They considered using the Former Mexican Southern Railroad Station and other spaces in the Historical Center to construct their CCCO

This architect determined that the Alvarillo Carrillo Theater Complex near the Tecnológico College, was a great place to build. In fact the Secretariat of Culture had it's offices there and moved out in 2013 to allow construction to begin.

However, the current administration wanted something even closer to the Historical Town Center that would benefit the existing infra-

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Fortín

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structure of hotels, restaurants and services in general.

And this is where the drama begins: In October 2014, the Secretary of Tourism and Economic development announced at a press conference that construction of the CCCO had been moved to the Cerro del Fortín, between the existing Guelaguetza Amphitheater, and the five star Hotel Victoria. According to a newspaper article published in Milenio, the Secretary is an important share owner in the Hotel, and the conflict of interest cause a muted uproar. Also, a geological survey made in 2011 declared the site unworthy to build on because of landslides and cracks in the earth.

Now, however there seems to be a reassessment of the geological survey declaring the site to be safe. Neither issue kept the Project from moving forward.

The Project was to begin with a 600 space parking lot. The location was to be just north of the Crespo stairs that climb to the Guelaguetza Amphitheater. What this entailed was tearing out an existing park called the Parque de la Amistad, Friendship Park. Local residents of the Guelaguetza neighborhood sought an injunction against the impending transformation of their neighborhood. And the First District Court did grant that the status quo be maintained. Nevertheless in June of this year the construction companies broke ground.

They have destroyed another park, el Parque de la Amistad, Friendship Park. Like the song goes, "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone, a paved Paradise, put up a parking lot" (Big Yellow Taxi by Joni Mitchell) In the process they chopped down more than three hundred trees. Some government representatives affirm that the Park was not destroyed, but the traffic and noise pollution created by the constant comings and goings of so many cars and trucks will change the peaceful character of the space.

Oaxaca's most iconic living artist, Francisco Toledo, is also one its most vociferous activists. Backed by his Pro Oax group, they

joined other concerned citizens at the construction site, to see what was going on. They were met by angry members of the CTM unión who confronted the citizens, and threw m-80 type firecrackers wounding several people including Rocio Olivera Toro, an activist, technical secretary to the Institute of Nature and Society of Oaxaca (INSO).

Several issues were uncovered in this process, one them being that the money for research and development of the CCCO, was only to be used for an Anti-poverty Fund.

The reader is encouraged to climb the impressive tree lined steps at Crespo, up to the Guelaguetza Amphitheater, and enjoy the morning light and listen to the birds and insects. The sunsets behind Monte Alban at certain times of the year which is magnificent too. On the way back down follow, the protective yellow railing downhill north bound, and have a look for yourself. The construction site is surrounded by a mesh fence that is lined with opaque black plastic, which is covered with vinyl signs expressing the support of local governments throughout the Oaxaca Valley.

The question is not about building a Convention Center, it is about where it is to be built. government owned land. Who defines where protected land starts and ends?

What happens when you open the door allowing development on protected land?

These are some of the many questions that the Cultural and Convention Center have sparked.

My personal view is that every city needs to protect open spaces and parks. How many trees will be planted for every tree that was cut down.



Francisco Toledo standing guard.

Mezcal

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their mezcalero family part owners of the company. Additionally, Gracias a Dios has a policy of replanting a plant for every one they use for making mezcal, according to Langley.

The spirit's value lies in its wide variation between species

Competition between brands is fierce - there are more than 150 labels competing out of Oaxaca. For an artisinally-produced product to thrive in such a large market it needs middlemen and women who are internationally savvy to represent the brand worldwide. Likewise, international enthusiasts are moving to Oaxaca to buy land, start labels, and ultimately export mezcal to the rest of the world.

"I don't see [silvestre mezcal] as a sustainable international market, it's just not an option... but as long as there's Espadin, there's mezcal," Langley said.

The spirit's value lies in its wide variation between species, and the beauty of mezcal is in the discovery of where it grew, how it was made and what it tastes like. Whether or not the demand for silvestre mezcal will overtake its ability to be harvested and produced is yet to be seen. Therefore, it must be enjoyed with moderation and respect to the tradition that it has upheld for hundreds of years. "It's a handmade alcohol and... it can't be made in China," Langley said. "But that's what makes it good, and that's what makes people have to come to Oaxaca."



The fermented agave is then distilled using copper or clay alembiques, or stills - technology introduced by the Spaniards during the conquest.