

Sites of Symbolic Density:
A Relativistic Approach to Experienced Space

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I. INTRODUCTION

The way we experience space and signify it in our everyday activities is far more complex than what Descartes' idea of *res extensa* might suggest. From physics' point of view, the elapsed notion of static Euclidean space filled with ether has been substituted by Hermann Minkowski's four dimensional space-time continuum. Albert Einstein further elaborated this idea into the General Theory that explains gravitation as a result of the curvature in this space-time continuum produced by matter ¹. These concepts are not easy to understand, yet it seems that we have intuitively followed similar assumptions on our experience of space in both private and public spheres. We deal with space as if certain objects and events in our cultural environment alter its configuration and become spiraling points of higher spatial density. Space is increasingly being understood closer to the idea of an organism developing in time, than to Kant's apriori, timeless and empty background for perceptions.

Such view of space-time-as unevenly bowed may be new for science but not, I am contending, as new for common awareness. Contrary to being conceived solely as an empty container, social imaginaries have, from very early times, tacitly apprehended space as somehow textured and bent not only physically but symbolically. Particular places have been

experienced as loaded with specific historical, noumenal and emotional value. The superposition of images in cave paintings suggests that certain places were conceived as having more magical power than others. Most religions have in common the enhancement of specific places as more symbolically dense than others. Peregrinations to sacred places such as Mecca, Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela and many others indicate that for the devout, not all places are equal, and that their significance is determined by their history and quality of events occurred exactly there.

II. DIFFERENTIAL SIGNS AND CHARGED SYMBOLS

We signify places according to two distinct kinds of semiotic orders. On one hand, a strictly semiotic order is displayed by means of a system of oppositions and differentiations according to Saussure's concept of the sign.² Countries, mountains, rivers, cities, neighborhoods, streets, buildings and rooms are designated by different names and numbers to enable distinctions according to conventional codes.

There is another sense in which places are designated, although we lack a cartography that depicts this particular way of understanding. This second way is the symbolic order, by which we experience places as being charged with specific personal or collective memories, stamped with emotional, historical and material loads. In other words, we experience space as a variegated and heterogeneous assortment of energetic, historical and material imports. Contrary to the semiotic system of conventional differentiations, the symbolic³ is substantially charged with energy, time and matter, motivated by specific events and strongly culture specific. To this second conception of meaning I will refer all through this paper.

III. TOWARDS SYMBOLIC TOPOANALYSIS

In human settlements, not only practical considerations have been reckoned such as material resources (water, fertile land) and strategic position (panoptic and physical protection against attacks), but also layers of meaning accumulated and enriched through time. A place, then, is not only physically shaped by geographical and architectural elements but it is also configured by these social imaginaries which are effectively constitutive of its meaning developed into quite complex symbolic organizations.

In his effort to construct a phenomenological archeology of images and a topoanalysis, Bachelard⁴ has stated various categories of spatial qualification. However, his attempt is limited to what he has named "images of happy space" which although sincerely and movingly, mostly portray a sense of intimate space characteristic to bourgeoisie's sense of dwelling. For an archeology and a phenomenology of lived space, we need a broader, not less specific, comparative approach of experiencing and signifying space. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the elaboration of a symbolic cartography of space by focusing on a particular way of building and experiencing such import of a place. I will take the Aztec formulation of their settlement and meaning of their capital city, the great México-Tenochtitlan, and its symbolical layers developed through time, as our case in point. We will explore how it came to happen that the whole country's territory symbolically coiled into a single spot and still remains so.

IV. FIRST LAYER: THE MYTHOLOGICAL SITE

According to the legend, the Aztecs emigrated from Aztlan following orders of their god Huitzilopochtli who commanded they should look for a place to settle (ca. X A.C.). This place was to be marked by an eagle standing on

a special kind of cactus, scientifically named *Opuntia*. In the *Segunda Relación* of Cuauhtlehuāniztlin⁵ another element is mentioned: it is no longer the fortuitous encounter with the prophetic image what enabled the founding of the Aztec city, but it was rather the result of a calculated act. While living with the permission of the people of Malinalco, Toluca and Texcaltepec, the Aztecs find out about a plan to attack them. The Aztec priest Cuauhtlequetzqui takes the initiative and kills his equal, the Malinalcan priest Copil (who is also nephew of the god Huitzilopochtli). He snatches his heart and orders his assistant Tenochtli to plant it as a seed among the canes and tulle plants. As time passes, he sends him back where the heart was buried and finds that a cactus germinated and grew from it, upon which an eagle was standing. This is where the city of Tenochtitlan is founded, on an islet right in the middle of the salty lake of Texcoco.⁶

There are other versions of this legend. In the 1528 manuscript called *Unos Anales de la Nación Mexicana*, the eagle was found in this place standing on a cactus whose leaves were covered with the bird's excrement.⁷ Another version is in *Crónica de Mexicayotl*, written by Moctezuma's grandson, Fernando de Alvarado Tezozómoc.⁸ They saw, according to this version, the eagle standing on the *Opuntia* surrounded by feathers and rests of birds it had eaten. In other versions, the eagle is devouring a serpent, always standing on the cactus. Finally, in the representation of the foundation of Tenochtitlan illustrated in the Mendoza Codex, we also have the eagle on the cactus of red prickly pears.

The eagle as an emblem of an empire is not exclusive to the Aztecs. Together with and previous to the bald eagle of the U.S.A., its persistence in western heraldry can be traced as early in history as Babylon, India, Persia, Greece, the Byzantine Empire, Prussia, Russia, Egypt, Rome, Austria and so on.⁹ What is unique in this case is not only its role as an index for the foundation of a capital city, but the presence of the *Opuntia*.

The eagle may have captured the people's imagination because of its fierceness, independence, predatory power and courage. It also has a formidable visual sharpness of great value for a community dedicated to hunting and warfare. We could add other qualities such as speed in attacking, longevity, grace, its being carnivorous and, more importantly, the strength and robustness of its claws capable of destroying victims of a larger size than the eagle itself. In stratified societies, an avis that flies independently and to great heights is obviously eligible as a symbol and index of high status.¹⁰ This solitary character, together with its fierceness, its habitat between earth and sky, between men and gods, may have motivated its being chosen as a symbol for the Aztecs and other cultures. Cuauhtlequetzqui, a name that relates to the eagle ("cuauh" means eagle in the Aztec language¹¹) says to Tenochtli (meaning *Opuntia* cactus): "el tunal o tenochtli serás tú, tú, Tenochtli. Y el águila que tú verás seré yo" (the cactus or tenochtli will be you, you Tenochtli. And the eagle that you will see will be I).¹²

If aloofness and courage motivated the choice of the eagle, which were the qualities that justify selecting the *Opuntia* as symbol and index of a place? There were other major plants that had equal importance for the survival of the Aztecs. Among these, we have the mezquite or algarrobo (*Prosopis*), corn and the maguey (*Agave*).¹³ However, *Opuntia*'s symbolic importance for the Aztecs is not equaled by any other plants, as is testified by its numerous representations in almost all the codex available such as Mendoza, Aubin (1540), Badian (1552), Bodelian (. XVI), Borbonic, Borgia, Boturini, Cospian, Cozcatzin, Durán, the Fájerváry-Mayer, the Florentin, Lord Kingsborough's, Magliabecchi, Quinatzin, the Texcocan of Tepechpan, the Xolotl and others. Such symbolic importance of the *Opuntia* didn't decrease with the Spanish conquest. Sodi Pallares¹⁴ mentions that at least in thirty Franciscan temples and convents founded since 1516, the image of the *Opuntia* appears in altars, carved chairs,

fountains, sculptures, paintings, ceramics, crosses, *retablos*, open chapels, baptismal piles, portals, carved chests and other furniture.

The symbolic preeminence of the *Opuntia* over other plants, such as *Agave* and corn, also basic for stable agriculture among ancient Mexicans, can be explained by the amazing number and variety of uses it had for these people: its fruits, leaves and flowers were eaten raw or cooked, the plants were used to arrange fences, the sap was useful as an emulsifier, as a lubricant that enabled moving great rocks, as a glue, as material for construction, for covering and sealing. It was also used for coloring black hair, for making vinegar, candies and a beverage named *colonche*. The seeds of the prickly pear were crushed for making pinole, a high protein nutritive powder. The fibers could be woven or burnt, since they had the quality of producing a very long flame of slow combustion, and therefore used in the ceremonies of the New Fire.¹⁵ Moreover, in this cactus lives the *nocheztli* or *grana*, an insect from which a very strong red colorant is produced for textiles, feathers and body decoration. The leaves were used as shields in battle, the thorns for sacrifice and penitence. The *Opuntia* was also used as a medicine and to cure the effects of various hallucinogens.¹⁶

This points to the fact that wherever the *Opuntia* could grow, life of the community could be secured. However, this cactus is so enduring that it is able to survive in quite extreme environments. *Opuntia* cacti are all over the country. That is why the image of the eagle was basic for distinguishing one place from another. The *Opuntia* represents the land altogether, matter, sustenance. The eagle was an indication from above to distinguish a territory from another, something like the will of the god. A cactus emerging from a whole lake and yet needing so little water is an image that echoes that of the eagle, able to fly enormous distances and heights and yet posing itself upon the thorny leaf of a cactus. This double image represents the Spartan quality of Aztecs.

Apart from this impressive quantity of utilizations that the *Opuntia* had for ancient Mexicans, an extra aesthetic and religious meaning springs from it. As I mentioned above, the *grana* insect is parasitic to it, whose outcome of red tint is associated to blood. Moreover, its fruit, the red prickly pear, was associated by its oval shape, color and size to the human heart. As it is known, the Aztecs believed they had to retribute life with life, the life of the community with the life of the sacrificed, in the same sense that fruits of the soil are sacrificed from immediate consumption for sowing, and the life of animals sacrificed for feeding humans. In equal sense, humans had to be sacrificed for feeding the gods. Huitzilopochtli, god of war and solar deity, had to be nourished with human hearts to gather enough strength for upholding its war against the moon every night and defeat darkness. The *Opuntia* cactus was literal food for men, and metaphorical food for the god. In this sense, the whole city of Tenochtitlan (meaning in Aztec language *tetl* (stone), *nochtli* (*Opuntia* cactus), *tlan* (place): "the place of the rock cactus"), was the cactus that fed the universe.

Whether the apparition actually occurred or not is hardly relevant for our analysis; what matters is how the construction of meaning of the place was stamped. We have here the basic survival conditions represented by the cactus, together with the indicating eagle to which an extra element was added: the cactus selected by the eagle was no ordinary cactus, but the one sprouting from a sacrificed priest's heart. There is a merging of two legends: a previous legend of Huitzilopochtli's command, and an after the fact legend of the victory of Cuauhtlequetzqui, the sacrifice of Copil and germination of his heart.¹⁷

We have a conjunction of two levels of meaning: the eagle represents metaphorically a heavenly and a political-military creature, while the *Opuntia* portrays a practical, earthly tribute to one of nature's species. Both, the political and the practical meanings, are synthesized in this

mythical icon. These two elements, repeated and represented by these two characters, Tenochtli and Cuauhtlequetzqui by linguistic association, synthesize earth and sky, the natural and the divine, the feminine and the masculine, the human and the superhuman, matter and energy. The image endows not only meaning to the place of residence but coherence to the world view of the Aztecs, who saw themselves responsible for the subsistence of the world. More Humans than Hume himself, the Aztecs never took for granted that the sun would rise the next morning.

V. SECOND LAYER; THE TEOCALLI OR IMPERIAL SITE

This highly significant event and site for the Aztecs, where the eagle stood upon the cactus, totally alters history and triggers the almost miraculous development during the brief period of one or one and a half century,¹⁸ of a bare islet in the middle of a lake into what Hernán Cortés depicted as a marvelous city comparable in size to Seville and Cordoba.¹⁹

Apart from the mythological sense of the place, other strategical and economical considerations were involved. From a political point of view, the site for the foundation of Tenochtitlan was crucial: by being in the middle of three reigns (Atzacapotzalco, Texcoco and Culhuacan), the Aztecs could always seek help from the other two whenever attacked by any of them.

The apparition in the middle of the lake of Texcoco forced the Aztecs, who were not people of the sea nor based their nutritional habits on fish, to become fishers and adapt to this environment ("This is when we are going to learn to fish with nets... There was the beginning of having to live by fishing with nets in the year 3 Rabbit, 1326").²⁰ However, since the Aztecs didn't use the wheel for transportation nor domesticated animals for hauling or riding, only vehicles on water enabled them to

carry great weights and became their main means of transportation. This may be considered an important practical reason.

The salty lake of Texcoco is also not good for agriculture. It is claimed, on the other hand, that there was a stream of sweet water in the middle of the islet, where the cactus emerged: "they found a beautiful eye of water..."²¹ "[T]hey went back to the fountain that they found the day before and they saw that formerly it was clear and pretty, and that day it was red, almost like blood."²² This image of the clear water turned into blood almost literally represents the development of the theocratic hold over the Aztecs: the transparency of the original poetic mythical image later became a stream of blood.

Exactly there, on the site of this flow of sweet water, they marked a square and began to build a very modest temple to Huitzilopochtli, around which the rest of the city set forth. Two centuries later, this fountain was kept inside a chamber of the great palace built over it.

In the foundations of the National Palace in Mexico City, a monument called the Teocalli of the Sacred Stone was found. It shows an eagle standing on the *Opuntia*. Blood is leaking from the eagle's beak to whom prickly pears, turned into human hearts, are offered. This finding indicates that the site where the original eagle was supposed to have appeared was right there, where it later became the Palace of residence of Moctezuma and the great temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. According to Alfonso Caso the *Opuntia* illustrated in the Teocalli is the tree of sacrifice to feed the sun with human hearts.²³ Since human hearts do not grow from cactus nor eagles feed on prickly pears, the metaphorical character of this image is obvious. The legend of the apparition is a rhetorical device, constructed as an indexical and iconic enthymeme, of the eagle as saying "this is where I will feed" which is culturally interpreted as "this is where the Aztec community will feed its god Huitzilopochtli and make the world abide."

That modest square that the original Aztecs marked around the rock where the cactus grew and the eagle stood, was the radial point from which all the temples and palaces of the empire were built. Together with the two great Palaces of Moctezuma and Axayácatl, as well as the *Templo Mayor*, other religious sites spiraled from this point: the temple of Tezcatlipoca, the temple of Quetzalcóatl, the *Tzompantli* or skull rack and the ball court, surrounded by the *Coah tepantli* or wall of serpents. Everything in the Aztec world revolved around this square, site of religious celebrations and of the second greatest market in all Mesoamerica.²⁴

VI. THIRD LAYER: THE SITE OF COLONIAL ASSERTION

On the afternoon of August 13, 1521, about two centuries after its foundation, Mexico Tenochtitlan was defeated by the Spanish *conquistador*. Destroyed to the degree of becoming inhabitable, Cortés had to move to Coyoacan. It had to be decided where the capital city of the New Spain was to be settled. Texcoco, Tacuba and Coyoacan were considered, but against common sense and his peers' opinion, Cortés had a clear decision in mind: "que había de ser donde habían vencido y donde se había sentado la antigua México."²⁵ Cortés understood well the importance of symbolic accumulation of meaning *in situ* and of its indexical eloquence. He appointed Alonso García Bravo to design the new city plan. García Bravo followed the original arrangement, kept the main plaza where it originally stood,²⁶ and reproduced unknowingly, that same little square around the rock of the cactus. The square continued to serve as the main market and site for religious and civil ceremonies. Moreover, in July 27, 1529, Cortés got for himself as place of residence the remains of Moctezuma's two main palaces due to a gift from His Catholic Majesty the Emperor Carlos V (of Germany and I of Spain): the Palace of Axayácatl or Old Houses of Moctezuma, and the New Houses of Moctezuma, respectively on the West and east sides of the main square.²⁷ The Palace of Axayácatl was where

Cortés dwelled during eight months with his troops as a guest of Moctezuma, and also where this great Aztec emperor found death by Cortés' orders, his body thrown down that same roof.²⁸ The other palace, Moctezuma's New Houses, is where the emperor dwelled. The symbolic density of these places was essential for Cortés: by owning exactly both of Moctezuma's palaces, Cortés symbolically and eloquently stated his substitution of Moctezuma's power.

He was appointed Governor and General Captain of the New Spain, but his power soon eclipsed when two other governors were later appointed and when the First and Second *Audiencias* were sent by the Spanish crown. By the time the first *Audiencia* was established, Cortés was asked by the Spanish Emperor Carlos V to please lend his property for this aim. He referred to no less than the Palace of Axayácatl. Furthermore, by 1562, fifteen years later after Cortés' death, the main colonial institutions, the *Audiencia* and the third *Virrey* were moved to the other of Cortés' properties, the main palace of Moctezuma and his dwelling. Cortés' son and heir, Martin Cortés, who attempted to crown himself Emperor of the New Spain and failed, was consequently forced to sell the palace of the New Houses to the Crown of Spain in exchange for saving his neck due to his instigation. This effaced any doubt about who was the real power over the New Spain: rather than Cortés' descendants, it was the Spanish Crown substituting Moctezuma. This fact was again spatially stated by the establishment of the Viceregal Palace on the precise site of Moctezuma's Palace.

In the *Ordenanzas de Audiencia* on April 23, 1528, it is stated that in order to better and more orderly keep the attendance of the *oidores* "that a clock should be continuously placed on a convenient place so everyone can hear."²⁹ The first clock ever to be placed in Mexico was originally installed at the Palace of Axayácatl at the time when the first two *Audiencias* and the two first *Virreyes* were located there. Not surprisingly, it was moved

later to the former palace of Moctezuma when these authorities moved.³⁰ As the eagle and cactus had a symbolic meaning for the Aztecs, so did the clock for the Spaniards. Both related to the sun and to the idea of time, the clock indicated a sense of order and integration of social activities. Valle-Arizpe mentions two other curious, nonetheless symbolical, aspects of the site: that the first Café of the city, symbol of the rising bourgeoisie's urban society, was placed on this previously Palace of Axayácatl, and that it was exactly there also where the *Marsellaise*, quite symbolic of the future Republican order, was sung for the first time in the New World.

What is important to note here is that Tenochtitlan was almost totally destroyed. The remnant temples and palaces were further ravaged to use their stones for constructing the new houses for the Spanish conquerors. It is true there was enough material for construction, but it was still very inconvenient to build a city in the middle of a lake. The underlying economical structure and distribution of goods was taken into account, yet a similar structure also existed in the other three places considered, as well as in Tlaltelolco. One could think of no other reason for choosing the ruins of Tenochtitlan than the symbolic meaning of the place. Cortés was not alone in this awareness of the symbolic charge of a site, since the Spanish emperors, both Carlos V and Felipe II, insisted on placing their representatives in no place other than Moctezuma's previous properties.

VII. FOURTH LAYER: THE EXECUTIVE SITE

After the administration of 63 *virreyes*,³¹ the anticolonial war, two regencies and the First Empire of Agustín Iturbide, by 1827 the site of power still remained on the exact same spot. Hereinafter, the first President of the new Republic, Guadalupe Victoria, moved to the National Palace followed by many others that succeeded him. The 1910 Revolution

almost began in this Palace where President Francisco I. Madero was imprisoned and later undeservedly murdered at Lecumberri. The symbolic charge of the place has been kept since Huitzilopochtli's appearance as an eagle over the cactus, to the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma's palace, to the house of the Spanish victor Hernán Cortés, to the Palace of the Viceregal up to the Republic's presidents until the present *Palacio de Gobierno, Sede del Ejecutivo*. Each of these varying authorities have stood on the exact same site.

The place has been kept constant, yet a key item has varied in direct relation to the distinctive quality representing this particular location. The indicative role that the *teocalli* had for the Aztecs and the clock for the Colonial order, was substituted by the bell during the Independent Republic. On September 14 1896, at one o'clock in the afternoon, a bell was installed over the central balcony of the National Palace for the celebration of the Independence. It was brought all the way from the town of Dolores, and claimed that it was the exact same bell that the Father of Independence, the priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, tolled for calling the people to fight against the Spanish Crown at dawn of September 16, 1810.³² Since then, (and even after an extra floor was added to the National Palace in the beginning of this century) this bell is made to resonate only once a year, at 11 o'clock of the night of September 15 by the President in turn. After the Revolution of 1910, another symbolic element was added: to prove the nationalistic advocacy of the *callista* government, Diego Rivera was hired to paint a mural in the main stairway of the Palacio representing the official version of the history of Mexico. The main subject was time: Mexico from the Prehispanic times to the future.³³ Like the Imperial Teocalli, the colonial clock and the bell of independence, Rivera's mural captured the idea of time precisely within this densely symbolic site.

The main city square of Tenochtitlan became the Colonial Zócalo³⁴ during the XVI century and is still not only the main city's plaza but the

main country's center. It was there where the Inquisitions' hangings took place, where a Mongolfier was elevated, where the main civic and religious ceremonies were performed, where goods and services were offered and acquired, where revolts ignited. More recently, every six years, each new *regente* or city major has used the Zócalo as a site for symbolic expression of his power and individuality by changing its decoration. The final word was taken by the people who have used it as site for protest under which no cute decorations could endure. The Zócalo is now a place of peregrination from all parts of the country to demonstrate against the President and express dissidence. Now a stripped extension of bare concrete in the middle of which the Mexican flag is risen daily, protesters lodge temporarily in plastic tents and undertake hunger strikes, make political speeches, march and demonstrate against the government. It is also the only place where Aztec dances are performed on a daily basis and where the memory of the lost empire is still evoked five centuries after its defeat.

Mexico City is densely charged in many senses: first, as we have seen, in a metaphorical sense which we can trace at least as early as 1200 or earlier, since the time of the prophecy. It was the site of the most powerful Empire in the American continent before the conquest and of the worst massacres during the onslaught. After the conquest it has been the center of viceregal political power that turned in our times into one of the most centralistic forms of government in the world. It is also the most populated city in the planet, close to 23 million inhabitants.

This year Mexico City was also the site of a major political change in the last 60 years, having the first elections ever for chief of government of the city, previously appointed every six years by the President which were, moreover, won by the candidate of an opposition party. This first elected chief of Government, (remarkably named Cuauhtémoc, after the last emperor of the Aztecs and related by the eagle prefix to Cuauhtlequetzqui)

will occupy his office south of the great Zócalo, a few meters from the place of apparition and of Moctezuma's palace.

Another significant event has just occurred on September 12, 1997. 1111 members of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional came to Mexico City for the first time since their declaration of existence in 1994. The reason was to begin the process of becoming a civil front, rather than an army. They advanced from their gathering place in Xochimilco towards no place other than the Zócalo. We have the conjunction of practical, political, historical and religious meanings all imploding continuously towards a single place. The character of political power has changed, the religion substituted, the language replaced, but the site remains immutable throughout time.

VIII. HUBS IN THE PRIVATE SCENE

If layers of meaning implode into a single place through collective memory and social traditions, this centripetal tendency is no less active in private, more intimate space. Baudrillard³⁵ has shown how domestic space is organized and how it acquires meaning by a particular arrangement of personal objects within it. He depicts this moral arrangement of objects as a representation of family relations. Furniture are like monuments that attest and portray class status, stability, credibility, solidity. Classical figures of rhetoric, such as alliteration, are used to emphasize and express particular meanings of places and relations within a house. The case of the flowers in the middle of a rounded vase on the center of a round tablecloth on the center of a round table which stands in the middle of a round rug, is a typical example of alliteration within this personal mapping of space. This is an apparently personal configuration of private space, although its rules are dictated socially by status. Every home seems to have a center or an assortment of centers marking the most meaningful private places for

the family: the classical living room center table, the dining room table and the matrimonial bed.³⁶ To enhance this particular place, decorative objects specially cherished by the owner are placed there. In the case of the bed, expensive bed covers, pillows and dolls are placed over it to emphasize its importance as center of the room. In these days, when cooking has lost its erstwhile full time dedication as a consequence of women integrating to paid labor away from home, the refrigerator has taken the central place that the hearth and stove used to have in the kitchen. We now see typical American homes with their huge refrigerators all decorated with children's drawings, notes and decorative magnets.³⁷ Baudrillard³⁸ depicts how in past times, the hearth for cooking constituted the main centripetal point of a home in the countryside. Later, the chimney was the main focal point, substituted in urban contexts by the clock and later by the radio around which sofas and chairs were arranged during the thirties and forties . During the fifties, it was the television set that acquired the status of center, enhanced by a flower pot over an embroidered cloth (as can still be found in many middle and low class homes in Mexico and other cities). The television set has been later dispersed into the bedrooms and recently substituted by the personal computer as the most concentrated place in a home, around which family members linger and items accumulate. During December, an extra locus is added in Christian homes: the Christmas tree establishes not only a different order in space but in time as well. All these items, the hearth, the chimney, the clock, the radio, the television and the computer are experienced as symbols of time, hence framing around them the family's private main square.

IX. PERSONAL LOOPS WITHIN PUBLIC SPACES

Not only private areas are ontogenetically orchestrated: the city we live in is also symbolically configured for each of its inhabitants in a particular

way. When we transit through its streets and neighborhoods, we experience places according to both phylogenetic and ontogenetic meanings. For De Certeau,³⁹ walking is a means of signifying places. I find it hard to agree with this idea that "the act of walking is to the urban system what speech act is to language or to the statements uttered."⁴⁰ We often walk so absent mindedly that these steps may be comparable only to talking asleep. Rather than simply walking, it is Dewey's "doing and undergoing"⁴¹ what makes affective memory color places and perceive some more densely meaningful than others. It is true that the streets we walked through in our childhood become specially meaningful to us, yet it is not by our walking through that we signify them nor what makes them meaningful, but it is rather due to the remains of the self they bring forth as an after image. More often than not, we are pulled in our transit by the area we want to reach, rather than explicitly stating each step of our route. On the other hand, places become personally significant by their fortuitous experiential result: we will always remember the spot where we were attacked or unpleasantly surprised, where we used to play or ride bicycle, places where we met with significant people, where we sat with profound grief, where we discovered a different sense of ourselves. This ontogenetic geography of meaning is complementary to the phylogenetic cartography of places for common celebrations, for political protest, for ritual gatherings and recollection of social disasters.

X. THE CARTOGRAPHY OF SYMBOLIC COMPRESSION

All these private and public places attest to the fact of a highly complex semiotic cartography. Space is experienced as everything but plain and neutral and always integrating the sense of time.⁴² I have highlighted one particular aspect of this symbolic cartography that seems salient: its layered, cumulative and compressed quality. The *Templo Mayor*, physically

built out of several layers of overlapping pyramids, is a perfect metaphor for the building of symbolic meaning of a place. Operating as magnets or strong gravitational fields, these symbolically dense places tend to attract further layers of meaning by warping its surroundings towards them.

Other prototypical cases of space-time bending is Mount Moriah over which, according to the Bible, Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac. It was later the location where the Temple to house the Ark of the Covenant was built by King Solomon until the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed it in 586 BC. Later rebuilt on the same spot by King Herod (40-4 BC) and destroyed again by the Romans in AD 70, it is presently the most sacred place for the Jews, two thousand years later. As Cortés chose to keep the symbolic density of the main square of Tenochtitlan and used the same parcel of Moctezuma for himself, so did the Moslems with the Dome of the Rock. More than half a millennium after the destruction of the Temple, the exact same place marked for Moslem tradition the site of Mohammed's ascension to heaven on June 8, 632 and where, 30 years later, the gold-domed mosque was erected. This site is consequently a dangerous focus of friction between Moslems and Jews in the present.⁴³

Another example of space-time symbolic implosion of meaning is the Kaaba in Mecca, Islam's most sacred sanctuary located in the courtyard of the Great Mosque. According to the Koran, the Kaaba was built by Adam and rebuilt by Abraham around a black rock that was given to Ismael by the Angel Gabriel. It was later a shrine for the pagan deities of the Arabs until Mohammed began to preach to the Meccans and rededicated it to Allah. Moslems, who have a duty of pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, face towards Mecca in their prayers (Jews face towards the Western Wall) as if space would bend towards these points.⁴⁴

XI. ORGANIC SPACE-TIME

As the Kaaba and the Golden Dome, Tenochtitlan is also related to a rock, the *tetl*, where the cactus or *nochtli* grew from. However, it is the *nochtli* rather than the *tetl* what expresses the primary meaning of the place. The *Opuntia*, as a living creature, was vulnerable and mortal. The world is transient, as an Aztec poet so poignantly expressed it:

" Is it really true that one lives on earth?
Not forever on earth, only for a while.
Even if it is jade, it breaks;
even if it is gold it cracks;
even if its *quetzal* feathers, it is torn,
not forever on earth: just barely here."⁴⁵

The sense that space was alive and could disappear, that not only great cities such as Monte Albán, Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, Mitla and others so mysteriously abandoned, could vanish, but that the world itself, place of places, could be no more, was present in the minds of the Aztecs. They believed that they were living in the fifth of other previously disappeared worlds, and that every 52 years the end could befall. For the Aztecs, time beats in the heart of space. Space is a mortal organism whose destiny is determined by discrete "quanta" of time. This view marks a very great difference with Western monotheistic beliefs of one world, one God and one definitive end, which is echoed today in the contemporary cosmological view of a closed universe that will reach its limits and contract again into an infinitely dense point, disappearing in another big bang implosion.

XII. CENTER AND HEART OF POWER

Originated in the Greek *agora*, the Roman traditional *forum* at the crossing point of the *cardo maximus* and the *decumanus maximus* has

influenced many other cities' pattern to our day. The Plaza Mayor, however, followed a similar north-south *cardo* (Tepeyac-Ixtapalapa) and east-west *decumanus* (Texcoco-Tacuba) ⁴⁶ with no liability to the Romans. Despite variations on the lay out of many cities, the square seems to be universal in the same degree that the assortment of meanings each of them radiates is specific and unique: Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the Red Square in Moscow, St. Peter's Square in Rome, Djma el Fna in Marrakech, Trafalgar Square in London, Lafayette Square in Washington and many others.

Lakoff and Johnson⁴⁷ insist that metaphorical mappings we use in everyday language operate according to a clear systematicity and a law of coherence. The same can be said about the symbolic use of space. In this sense, the perpetuation of the same site despite variation of the character of the authorities, is consistent with the idea of perpetuation of power and the variation and substitution of leaders. It is as if power ought to be seen not as a social construction or depending upon will and strength but rather as a magical and superhuman force stemming from a site (as the specific spot in cave paintings). Whoever happens to be on this site automatically and legitimately takes possession of this power. The individual person himself, regardless of the range of his heroic deeds, the quantity of popular vote, the evidence of his birthright or the official legitimacy of his appointment, is not mighty enough *per se* to justify authority without the help of the symbolic import of place. The precise place as accumulation of symbolic charges, seems to be the real and most eloquent crystallization of power. Taking hold of a place is taking hold of power. The place endows the aura of power, earthly or divine, to its occupants.

To mark this distinct quality of the place and to make power more explicit and categorical, other semiotic and aesthetic devices are required. Great energy investments of labor in luxurious buildings and decoration,

rare expensive materials such as precious metals and stones, legends of immemorial times and unfathomable heroes, all add to the unequivocal character of hierarchy. Yet the place, as a sponge that has absorbed layers of time and history, is ultimate.

Lakoff and Johnson also refer to what they call "orientational metaphors" that are spatially configured and relative to our body. In this sense, sites of symbolic compression are experienced as hearts of the national body in civic centers, or of the religious body in holy centers. Tenochtitlan as organic space-time and cactus of hearts, was made to beat by the sound of the *huéhuetl* and the *teponachtli*⁴⁸ during sacrifice ceremonies. When this heart was snatched by the conquest, it was replaced by the clock of the Palace pounding through the colonial body. After the Independence, it was substituted by Hidalgo's bell on an annual basis and by the drums of the military band accompanying every day the rise and descent of the banner (with the eagle and the cactus at the very center of the flag) in the center of the Zócalo.

Rudolf Arnheim⁴⁹ defines the center as the point of convergence of forces and finds that elements in nature spontaneously agglutinate around a center (as in our planetary system, a tree, a crystal and the human body). He states that we perceive asymmetry and anisotropy mainly by two bodily senses: sight and kinesthesia, the latter as a sense that perceives physical tensions in the body and interprets as weight what is gravitational force.⁵⁰ Gravitational attraction totally alters our perception of space, since what is up and down may not have particular meaning in neutral space, whereas according to gravity and body orientation, "up" requires an effort that "down" does not. ⁵¹

XIII. STARS AND BLACK HOLES

Trying to explain the quality proper to sites of symbolic density in Newton's terms (as a force of attraction of matter over matter) does not help elucidate why some stones or bones, rather than others, have impelled masses of people to peregrinate and to fight over certain places for centuries. Instead of looking at the effects of gravitation over matter as Newton did, Einstein tried to understand the effects of matter over gravitation. According to the General Theory of Relativity, gravitation is less a force than a distortion in the structure of space-time continuum due to the effects of matter. The Black Stone of Mecca, the bones of Saint James, the hidden Ark of the Covenant and the mythical *Opuntia*, alter the symbolic configuration of an otherwise neutral place extending its influence as the concentric ripples of a stone dropped in a pond.⁵²

These particular sites seem to slow down time by making the past still active and alive, as if it would abide and overlap into the present. We can also say they stretch out space, since the single spot where a cactus grew, was able to generate meaning in expanding waves through successive constructions that inherit and increase its original symbolic charge. This is what happened during the several layers from the original *tenochtli* to the present Palacio Nacional, configurations that do not stand adjacent to each other, but are contained within an inverted nipple that is elastic enough to continue bending by the added symbolic weight of successive significant events.

Following the metaphorical mapping of relativistic cosmology, one could say that holy places radiate a great amount of energy to the pious, whereas black holes exert a tremendous gravitational field that absorbs all matter and energy. Peregrines that go to Santiago and Mecca may feel instilled with warmth and a gentle radiance emanating by the symbolic glow of the place due to their faith. Yet, not all stars are bright. Facing the events that occurred in Auschwitz and Treblinka ⁵³ collapses our capacity

of understanding in the same sense as black holes deplete all energy even out of light.

During this century, we have amassed an ominous list of human catastrophes that began with thousands of Armenians massacred by Kurds in 1909 and by Turks in 1915: Amritsar, April 13, 1919 ; Badajoz, 1936; Guernica, April 1937; Katyn Forest April-May 1940; Babi Yar September 29-30, 1941; Sharpeville March 21 1960; My Lai March 16, 1968; Tlatelolco square October 2, 1968; Sabre and Chatila September 15, 1982 ; Tiananmen square June 3-4 1989, Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-3; Rwanda and Burundi 1972-97; Algeria 1997...⁵⁴

We have been guided by stars for orientation in space and time. Our first star, the sun, has guided us to discern day from night, to understand space in our planetary system and is now leading us towards other suns, to the confines of the universe and to the beginning of time. Perhaps the idea of black holes may someday guide us to realize that the flexibility of our space-time may not be infinite and that its delicate fabric can be irreversibly punctured.

XIV. CONCLUSION

I have proposed the application of a conceptual mapping adopted from a lay interpretation of the Theory of Relativity to elucidate the symbolic meaning of places. By focusing on the specific case of México-Tenochtitlan, I tried to show how this frame can be used. I am hopeful it has provided tools to interpret how emotionally and historically charged events and objects have transformed the structure of their surroundings and how this organic unfolding through subsequent episodes tends to increase this loop and sustain their lure throughout history. This does not deny that other frames of reference might be useful with equal or better results, but in approaching experienced space not as a psychological but as an

aesthetic phenomenon, we don't have that many theoretical alternatives other than Baudrillard, Arnheim, Bachelard and De Certeau's assemblage of remarks. I'm not suggesting that we should pursue a grand unified theory, unaccomplished by physicists until this day. I hold, however, that the examination of contemporary paradigms that deal with space such as topology and cosmology and the effort to construct an analogous version in regards to personal and social experience of it (perhaps not wholly incommensurable with abstract space) is worth attempting. After all, a physicist's intuition of space does not originate solely out of pure numbers.

¹ I may suggest the following readings on relativity for laymen and laywomen: Albert Einstein, *Über die Spezielle und die Allgemeine Relativitätstheorie* (English Relativity, the Special and the General Theory: a Popular Exposition by Albert Einstein. Authorised translation by Robert W. Lawson (New York: Crown Publishers, 1961); Max Born, *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* (prepared with the collaboration of Gunther Leibfried and Walter Biem (New York: Dover Publications, 1965); James A. Coleman, *Relativity for the Layman; a Simplified Account of the History, Theory, and Proofs of Relativity* (New York: William-Frederick Press, 1958); Robert Geroch, *General Relativity from A to B* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

² Saussure's great contribution to semiotics was eliminating the common idea that words carry their meaning as a receptacle or container. Instead, Saussure noted that meaning (or the signified) of a term (or signifier) depends upon its relations of differentiation and opposition within the system of a language.

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Curso de Lingüística General*. (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967).

³ On this distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic orders, a brief summary can be consulted in Katya Mandoki, "Between Signs and Symbols; An Economic Distinction?," in *Semiotics Around the World; Synthesis in Diversity*, ed. Irmengard Rauch and Gerald Carr (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), 1015-1018. A broader version is developed in Katya Mandoki, *Prosaica; introducción a la estética de lo cotidiano* (México: Grijalbo, 1994), 99-120.

⁴Gaston Bachelard, *Poética del espacio* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986), 27.

⁵Cuauhtlehuanitzin Chimalpahin, "Segunda Relación" in *De Teotihuacán a los Aztecas; antología de fuentes e interpretaciones históricas*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977), 159-160.

⁶ It is interesting to note several common elements with another foundational legend: chance/augury, murder, escape, gods of war. 1. Chance: the site at the foot of the Palatine was chosen for the foundation of Rome because it was right there where the trough, in which Romulus and Remus were placed, stranded. This element of chance is comparable to the posing of the eagle. As the prophecy by Huitzilopochtli, the foot of the Palatine was also selected by augury .2. Escape: the twin babies were hidden to protect them against their uncle Amulius (as the Aztecs had to escape persecution from the other tribes) 3. There is also a murder involved, as in the case of Copil: Romulus killed his twin brother Remus as a consequence of an argument about the foundation. 4. War: as the Aztecs followed Huitzilopochtli, god of war, Romulus and -Remus were sons of Mars, Latin god of war.

⁷ Here it is Copil's head which was buried by Tenoch, while Cuauhtlequetzqui buried his heart. *Unos Anales de la Nación Mexicana: Manuscripts 22-A and 22-B at the National Library in Paris*. (Copenhagen: Facsimile edition of Mengin, 1945).

⁸ This text written about 1600, is based on old texts of the Mexica Royal House. Fernando de Alvarado Tezozómoc, "El Águila y el Nopal" ca. 1600 in *La literatura de los aztecas*, ed. Angel Ma. Garibay (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1970) 43-46.

⁹ It is commonly believed that our national emblem consists on an eagle devouring a serpent. Guillermo Boils has explored this image of the eagle and serpent as an emblem in several cultures and concludes that what is unique to the Mexican emblem is the *Opuntia*, rather than the eagle and the serpent, which is common to several other cultures. See Guillermo Boils, "Símbolos nacionales y simbolismo universal; águilas devorando serpientes en diversas culturas". *En Síntesis*, 6 no. 20 (1995). It is interesting to note that this idea that the image of eagle and the serpent is not characteristic to our emblem appeared in an article of Alfonso Reyes "Virgilio y América" *Monterrey* no. 10 (1933) where he states that this image of the eagle devouring the serpent can be traced as far as Virgil's *Eneid* XI-751-58. Also in "Los romanos tenían también como símbolo el águila y la serpiente de nuestro escudo nacional" in the Mexican newspaper *El Universal* (February 10, 1937), the same conclusion is presented. These two accounts are given in a note by Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, *Historia de la Ciudad de México según los relatos de sus cronistas*, (México: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1946), 34-36.

¹⁰ I am taking the term "symbol" exclusively in the sense I explain above in Section 2 and according to references stated in note # 1. The term "index", however, does follow Peirce's definition. See Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as

Semiotic; The Theory of Signs" in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 98-119.

¹¹ *Diccionario nauatl-español, español-nauatl*,(Toluca, Edo. de México: Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura, Colegio de Lengua y Literatura Indígenas) no date.

¹² Translation is mine. In Chimalpahin, "Segunda Relación", 160.

¹³ On the importance of these three plants since the origins of Aztec culture, see L. González Quintero, L. "Origen de la domesticación de los vegetales en México". *Historia de México* (México: Editorial Salvat), I: 81-86.

According to Claudio Flores. the *Opuntia* was used since 25000 years ago, although evidence only traces it back to 7000 years from excavations in Tamaulipas and Tehuacán. See Claudio A. Flores V., "Historia del uso del nopal en México y en el mundo" in eds. Juan de la Fuente, Rafael Ortega y Miguel Sámano . *Agricultura y agronomía en México; 500 años*. (México: Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo, 1993), 156.

¹⁴ Ernesto Sodi Pallares, "Las Cactáceas en las épocas pre-colombina y virreynal, y en el siglo XIX," *Cactáceas y suculentas mexicanas*, 13, no. 1 January-March (1968): 3-12.

¹⁵ On the uses of the *Opuntia*, see: Helia Bravo-Hollis, . *Las cactáceas en México* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1978), Rafael Martin del Campo, "Las Cactaceas entre los Mexica". *Cactaceas y suculentas mexicanas*, 2, no. 2. April-June (1957), Facundo Barrientos P., "El nopal y su utilización en México," *Revista de la Sociedad Mexicana de Historia Natural*, 26, December, (1965): 87-90, Secretaría de Desarrollo Agropecuario, *Algunos usos prehispánicos de las cactáceas entre los indígenas de Mexico* (México: Dirección de Recursos Naturales, 1982), and Flores "Historia del uso del nopal,". Today it is used for the conservation of land, to reduce levels of pollution, as forage, for export of pectin,

fructose, cellulose, viscose, nectars y colorants for the production of cosmetics and other uses. We also know now that it helps reduce cholesterol and sugar levels in the blood.

¹⁶ Later, during the Colony, the Inquisition used its leaves to burn its victims. A story is recalled of such cases as when Don Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte supposedly screamed "échenle más pencas a la lumbre, desgraciados, para eso me cuesta mi dinero" Throw more *pencas* (leaves of the cactus) to the fire, that's why I've paid. in Sodi Pallares, "Las cactáceas," 10-12.

¹⁷ As I have stated above, since Copil was Huitzilopochtli's nephew, his order of killing him, his own blood, means a sacrifice by Huitzilopochtli himself.

¹⁸ Walter Krickeberg attempts, but does not really succeed, to answer himself how was it possible to build a city comparable to Venice in less than one third or even one fourth the time it took to build Venice (at least 500 years). Walter Krickeberg, *Las antiguas culturas mexicanas* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1961), 44.

¹⁹ Hernán Cortés, "Segunda Relación" in *De Teotihuacán a los Aztecas; antología de fuentes e interpretaciones históricas*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977), 172.

²⁰ "Ahora es cuando vamos a aprender a pescar con redes....Allí dió comienzo el tener que vivir pescando con redes en el año 3 Conejo, 1326" according to Moctezuma's grandson Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc "Crónica Mexicáyotl" in *Seis siglos de la ciudad de México* ed. Salvador Novo (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974), 15.

²¹ "Vinieron buscando y mirando si hallarían algún lugar que fuese acomodado para poder hacer asiento, y andando de esta manera por una partes y por otras entre las espadañas y carrizales, hallaron un ojo de agua hermosísimo..." Fray

Diego Durán "De cómo los mexicanos, avisados de su dios, fueron a buscar el tunal y el águila, y cómo lo hallaron, y del acuerdo que para el edificio tuvieron" in *Historia de la Ciudad de México según los relatos de sus cronistas*, ed. Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, (México: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1946), 26-27.

²² "Tornaron a topar con la fuente que el día antes salía clara y linda, aquel día salí bermeja, casi como sangre" Durán, "De cómo los mexicanos," 29.

²³Alfonso Caso, "El águila y el nopal," *Memorias de la Academia Mexicana de la Historia*. no. 2, April-June (1964), 102-104.

²⁴The first was the older market of Tlaltelolco, also a highly symbolical site in Mexico city to the present date, as it was there where the 1968 massacre of students occurred, and where high apartment buildings collapsed during the 1985 earthquake killing hundreds of people.

²⁵Luis González Obregón, *Las calles de México*. (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1922), 125.

²⁶ Francisco Cervantes de Salazar could be considered the first chronicler of the capital city of the New Spain. He wrote a dialogue between the fictional characters, Alfaro, Zuazo and Zamora, describing the main square. See Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, "La Plaza Mayor en 1554" in *Historia de la Ciudad de México según los relatos de sus cronistas*, Artemio de Valle-Arizpe (México: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1946), 241-251.

²⁷ Artemio de Valle-Arizpe *El Palacio Nacional; monografía histórica y anecdótica* (Mexico: Compañía General de Ediciones, 1936), 32.

²⁸ Artemio de Valle-Arizpe "El Palacio de Axayácatl o Casas Viejas de Moctezuma" in Valle-Arizpe, *Historia de la Ciudad de México*, -215-27.

²⁹Valle-Arizpe, "El Palacio de Axayácatl," 216. There seems to be an anachronism in the description of Francisco Cervantes de Salazar quoted by Valle-Arizpe of the

Plaza Mayor in 1554, where one of the characters notices "What is the meaning of those weights hanging from ropes? Oh! I didn't realize: they are from the clock." It was only 30 years later when Galileo demonstrated in 1583 the regularity of movement in the pendulum and it was applied to clocks 70 years later, in 1656 with Huygens first weight-driven clock controlled by a pendulum. It must have been a weight-driven clock.

³⁰ Valle-Arizpe, "El Palacio de Axayácatl," 216.

³¹ One of which, specifically Don Fray Garcia Guerra, both Viceroy and Archbishop, went as far as to install a plaza for bull fights inside the National Palace. Quite a character, as Valle-Arizpe ironically depicts him. Arizpe, *El Palacio Nacional*, 41.

³² Valle Arizpe doubts that it was the same bell tolled by Hidalgo, but rather something like the lateral cowbells on that same church. However, as in the case of the eagle over the cactus, the true facts are not particularly relevant; what counts are the connotations and circulation of the object and its symbolic import. Valle-Arizpe, *El Palacio Nacional*, 151-152.

³³ This mural(1929-1935) was later developed into the north and east halls of the first floor (1941-1951) of the Prehispanic era until the Conquest. For more information, see Ester Acevedo, Alicia Azuela et al. *Guía de Murales del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México* (México: Universidad Iberoamericana, CONAFE 1984).

³⁴ Probably comes from *zoco*, market in Arabic.

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des Objets*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

³⁶ Some Russian homes receive their guests around the dining room table, while Americans receive them around the living room table.

³⁷ This is not as much the case in Mexico since many middle class families still can afford to hire a live in maid and cook. Kitchens are mostly located in a different room next to the breakfast room and separated by a door from it, and by two doors from the dining room.

³⁸Baudrillard, *Le Système*, chap.1.

³⁹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), VII.

⁴⁰ De Certeau, *The Practice*, 99.

⁴¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee,1980).

⁴²Designing excessively uniform spaces can produce a sense of anxiety which some feel, for instance, at airports with long corridors and identical gates repeating themselves one after another.

⁴³A few meters from there, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was begun in the 4th century A.D. and rebuilt by the Crusaders beginning in 1099.

⁴⁴Another significant place for its material and historical value is the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The bones discovered in 813, (believed to be those of the apostle James) are kept in this cathedral erected by Alfonso II, one of the most important shrines for pilgrimage in the Christian world.

⁴⁵ Translation mine from original text:

"¿Acaso de verdad se vive en la tierra?

No para siempre en la tierra: sólo un poco aquí.

Aunque sea jade se quiebra,

aunque sea oro se rompe,

aunque sea plumaje de quetzal se desgarrá,

no para siempre en la tierra: sólo un poco aquí.

"Cantares Mexicanos" in *De Teotihuacán a los Aztecas; antología de fuentes e interpretaciones históricas*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977), 499.

⁴⁶ On prehispanic urbanization, see Jorge González Aragón, *La urbanización indígena de la Ciudad de México; el caso del plano en papel maguey* (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1995) and María del Carmen León Cázares, *La Plaza Mayor de la Ciudad de México en la vida cotidiana de sus habitantes* (México: Instituto de Estudios y Documentos Históricos, 1982).

⁴⁷George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁴⁸ Both are prehispanic percussion instruments.

⁴⁹Rudolf Arnheim, *El Poder del Centro* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984) original title *The Power of the Center; A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (California: The Regents of the University of California 1982), 16.

⁵⁰ Arnheim, *El Poder del Centro*, 23.

⁵¹In this same sense, far and near are relative to what is considered a center, whether privately as our home or collectively as the city center, not arbitrarily denominated "downtown" in English, as it is more natural to be down than up.

⁵² A very recent case that is also developing into a quasi mythical affair is the precise point of the "Bridge of the Soul" in Paris where Princess Diana's car crashed on August , 1997. This spot will probably become a place of reverence and awe. The Royal family of England will from now on be forever linked to this site in public emotional memory. The money offered for acquiring the crashed car is a good example of how otherwise common objects become charged with emotional energy and turn into symbols.

⁵³ And other numerous places such as Sachsenhausen, Ravensbruck, Flossenburg, Buchenwald, Mauthausen...

⁵⁴Amritsar, April 13, 1919 (a crowd of peaceful Indian civilians massacred by the British General Dyer); Badajoz, 1936 (civilians massacred after their surrender to Franco); Guernica, April 1937 (Spanish civilians bombed by Nazi aircraft); Katyn Forest, April-May 1940 (15,000 Polish officials massacred by Soviet secret forces); Babi Yar, September 29-30 1941 (33,771 Soviet Jewish civilians machine-gunned by the *Einsatzgruppen*); Sharpeville, March 21 1960 (South African police opened fire on a large crowd of black Africans); My Lai, March 16 1968 (300 unarmed Vietnamese civilians killed by an American infantry); Sabre and Chatila, September 15 1982 (hundreds of Palestinians massacred by Phalangist militia); Tiananmen Square, June 3-4 1989 (about a thousand students killed by the People's Liberation Army); Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-3 (ethnic "cleansing" of Serbs against Moslems); Rwanda and Burundi 1972-97 (violence between Hutu and Tutsi tribes), Algeria, 1997 (ongoing slaughter of Algerian civilians by Islamic fundamentalists).