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“Managua Is Nicaragua” The Making of a Neoliberal City

THE CHANGING FACE of the city of Managua in Nicaragua reflects the current government’s desire to erase evidence of the revolutionary past and to present a welcoming environment for foreign investors and the national elite. The use of urban space is inflected by gender and power in the neoliberal era as women and low-income residents in general are removed from public view or located in marginal sites. Ironically, harsh conditions may be catalyzing a more unified response from civil society to address the nation’s problems. [Latin America, Nicaragua, neoliberalism, gender, cultural politics]

O FTEN IT IS said that Latin America receives attention from the U.S. only when there is a revolution or natural disaster.¹ Nicaragua has experienced both in its recent history, with a significant impact on the capital city of Managua. The Sandinista Revolution (1979–1990) brought about a process of progressive social transformation in the small Central-American country, while earthquakes, volcanoes, and hurricanes have wrought untold destruction in Nicaragua and neighboring countries in the last decades. An earthquake in 1972 destroyed most of Managua, leaving it a wasteland. In contrast, Hurricane Joan in 1988 targeted the Atlantic coast and Hurricane Mitch ten years later concentrated losses in the northwest area of the country. Even so, the capital has felt the effects of the most recent disaster as food and other costs continue to escalate because of damaged crops, and as many who are homeless and without productive land migrate to the city in search of shelter and livelihood. National recovery is painfully slow and, as usual, women and the poor bear the major responsibility of caring for families in the most vulnerable circumstances.

In the course of these natural disasters, Nicaraguans have suffered further when governments have failed to respond adequately to crisis conditions. Under the current presidency of Arnoldo Alemán, just as under the Somoza dictatorship that preceded the revolutionary government, deeply entrenched poverty and willful mismanagement have

made economic recovery a near impossibility. Neoliberal policies of structural adjustment mandated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank had already cut sharply into social spending, adversely affecting education and health care as well as the country's infrastructure. Now, without a social safety net, the majority of those affected face unbearable hardship. Alemán had built his political reputation in the early 1990s as mayor of Managua on projects to modernize the capital city, but populist rhetoric notwithstanding his attention focused on the interests of the elite. His strongest allies were returning Miami exiles and members of the conservative Catholic Church hierarchy. Since his election as president in 1996, Alemán has applied the same neoliberal development model to the country as a whole—though still concentrating on the capital and giving less attention to rural areas.

Managua is certainly *not* Nicaragua. The title of this essay is taken from a report prepared in 1984 by Nicaragua's Center for the Study of Agrarian Reform (CIERA). "*Managua es Nicaragua*" referred to the city as a window on the history of national development as well as underdevelopment. During the Sandinista decade the effort to bring about social and economic transformation was in many instances directed to the rural areas but impeded by urban interests. Managua's relationship to the country as a whole was seen as paramount and as mediating Nicaragua's relationship with the rest of the world. The rapidly growing city has had a commanding—sometimes dominating—presence as the product of twentieth-century agrarian capitalism's failure to modernize Nicaragua. As the CIERA report states: "In this double sense (as expression of the past and determination of the future), Managua is Nicaragua" (1984:3).

Yet the widely-held view that Managua's relationship to the rest of Nicaragua has been detrimental and has stood in the way of national development should be countered with a more balanced perspective. A good deal of concern arises from the rapid pace of urbanization, as those who leave the countryside for the city appear, most visibly though unofficially, in *asentamientos* (squatter settlements) and in the informal (unregulated) economy—contributing to the notion that city dwellers are parasites in the national economy and society. The loss of labor in the rural sector was a concern under the Sandinista government, which tried through agrarian reform to stem migration and increase national production of coffee, cotton, maize and beans. But some of the revolutionary government's policies, for example food-price subsidies designed to benefit consumers, had the unintended effect of curtailing rural production and enticing more farmers to the city. So, although Managua has had a pivotal role in the political and economic geography of the country, it would be a mistake to hold the city *per se* responsible for recent structural problems of development (Massey 1987).

Cities have frequently borne the brunt of criticism as drains on economies and as centers of corruption (Holston 1999; Fincher and Jacobs 1998). Under the Somoza dictatorship Managua earned the reputation as

the playground of a small elite, but the Sandinistas did much to redistribute resources and alter historical inequalities. Following the revolutionary decade, a small but growing elite is again favored by a government inclined toward neoliberal development—rolling back the state sector and promoting the market economy. Managua is being remade to accommodate the consumption needs and desires of the wealthy. It must also be remembered that the majority of the city’s population is struggling to provide for itself in marginal, though productive, employment.² Ultimately, the government will be accountable for the deepening social problems and economic inequalities that are evident in the city.



Silhouette of Sandino stands above Managua

After discussing the changing face of the city of Managua, I consider how neoliberalism has altered the urban landscape in ways that are inflected by gender, class, and power. I point to some recent efforts to conceive a new urban political culture attentive to gender and power that has emerged in response to the social economic reconfiguration of post-Sandinista Nicaragua. By taking Managua as both a subject of study and as the context for my research and by remaining mindful of the city’s historical relationship to the rest of the country and the world, I suggest a way out of urban anthropology’s conundrum as formulated by Richard Fox almost thirty years ago. In a landmark essay, Fox (1972:205) wrote “In much contemporary urban anthropology, the city only appears as a difficult, even hostile environment for impoverished, culturally distinctive and historyless populations.” My work joins that of other anthropologists who are heeding his call for an approach that embraces the city itself as a subject of research.

A City Forsaken

In Managua's well-known restaurant Los Antojitos across the street from the exclusive Intercontinental Hotel, visitors are treated to panoramic photographs of tree-lined avenues and tall buildings that marked the center of the city before the 1972 earthquake. After the earthquake, Managua was in shambles and the international aid that came in was squandered by the Somoza government, the family dynasty that held power for over four decades.

Located below sea level in the Pacific region of the country, Managua is surrounded by the country's famous lakes and volcanoes. Lake Managua is its northern limit, while the volcanic Momotombo presents an impressive backdrop to the city. Almost three decades after the earthquake destroyed it, the city has a feeling of structurelessness, with open spaces where there was once an urban core. Two principal roadways, named *Resistencia* and *Solidaridad* by the Sandinistas,³ pass through neighborhoods that spread out in a broad semi-circle around the ruins of the old city. Other roads radiate from the old center and intersect with the major roadways. The main arteries in and out of the city, the North and South Highways, form part of the Pan-American Highway.

The generally hot, tropical climate of Managua is relieved only by rains between May and October. Although surrounded by lakes, Managua lacks water. Much of the city goes without water for a couple days each week; the poor majority hoard barrels of water. Electricity is also unreliable and in short supply, and power outages are frequent, especially in poor and working class neighborhoods. For many in the barrios, the costs of these utilities are prohibitive whether they are available or not.

In 1979, the social movement turned revolutionary insurrection triumphed and installed the FSLN (Sandinista Front for National Liberation) government of Daniel Ortega. Managua's population expanded during the Sandinista period as a result of migration because of the Contra war as well as internal growth. Today the city has over one million residents, or a third of the country's population. The squatter settlements where most of the recent arrivals live ring the city and lack basic services. Often, great efforts are made by residents to secure housing titles in order to safeguard their property. Even the more established barrios have a confusing appearance to the untrained eye, though their streets are typically laid out in square blocks known as *manzanas*, together forming different neighborhoods. Residents give directions in relation to Lake Managua (north) and by reference to going up (east) or down (west), counting the number of manzanas from well-known landmarks. Sometimes, they refer to landmarks that no longer exist ("where the little tree was") or to places that shut down long ago but are still remembered ("the León movie theater"), presenting a challenge to newcomers.

The Sandinistas were determined to make basic resources available to the broad population in Nicaragua, and to that end emphasized agrarian reform, literacy and health care, and later, defense of the revolution against U.S.-supported Contras. Urban renewal was not a priority, but efforts were made to transform cities through popular culture, most dramatically through the painting of colorful murals in Managua and elsewhere. Parks were established in honor of revolutionary heroes and martyrs, streets and plazas were renamed to commemorate triumphs, and the international airport was renamed to honor the national hero Augusto César Sandino. But the old streets paved with traditional hexagonal bricks (*adoquines*), torn up to form barricades during the insurrection, went unrepaired and potholes were rampant.



Mural in the garden of the Ben Linder House

Nicaraguans were by and large patient during those years, when basic needs took precedence over improvements of the city's infrastructure. Still, the Contra war and the U.S. economic embargo produced a weary population eager for peace and economic stability. In contrast to the 1984 elections, when Daniel Ortega and the FSLN demonstrated that the revolutionary government could remain in power through a democratic process, the 1990 elections saw the unexpected loss of the Sandinistas to Violeta Chamorro and the electoral coalition known as the UNO (National Opposition Union). Deeply gendered political campaigns, with “Daniel” represented as a proudly strutting rooster and “Doña Violeta,” symbolically dressed in white with outstretched arms, the image of the holy mother, contributed to a gender gap in the vote. Women may have been motivated more than men to support the candidate who embodied the hope for an end to war and economic hardship.⁴ Putting a conciliatory face on the presidency, Chamorro inaugurated a regime of neoliberalism in Nicaragua while making concessions to the Left.

In the early 1990s, Managua's mayor Arnoldo Alemán won approval for carrying out a public works program. Potholes were filled, and new traffic circles and fountains were constructed. The so-called "Miami boys" returned to Nicaragua to open establishments such as restaurants and supermarkets. Four-wheel drive vehicles crowded Managua's already congested streets, while vendors (many of them women and children) were forced away from some busy intersections and began lining the highways leading into and out of the city.

Many of the murals, a hallmark of the revolutionary era, were systematically painted over, stripping the city of its only color and popular expression of hope. A North American scholar writing about the murals lamented that:

None are now safe, despite the law passed by the Sandinista government just before leaving office, declaring as many murals (and martyr monuments) as they could name to be historic patrimony, and therefore untouchable. The murals are a narrative of a revolutionary convulsion the very memory of which the new government wishes to wipe out. [Kunzle 1995:13]

Just after the UNO government was installed, it erased other symbols of the Sandinista Party. The huge letters FSLN set in stone on a hillside visible from Managua were changed to FIN (end—i.e., of Sandinismo) and then erased completely. A monument commemorating FSLN founder and martyr Carlos Fonseca first saw its flame extinguished and then the tomb was bombed. Portraits of heroes of the revolution were removed from ministries and other public sites, replaced by photographs of President Chamorro (Kunzle 1995:14). Alemán could not remove the towering silhouette statue of Sandino that dominates the Managua skyline for political reasons, but he did propose the construction of another icon, a monolithic statue of the Virgin Mary, as a rebuke to the remaining Sandinista monuments. This five-million-dollar project met with great protest, however, by urban residents who felt the money should be spent on such urgent needs as housing for the homeless. Another project of the mayor, to build a huge new cathedral with millions of dollars contributed by Domino Pizza heir Tom Managhan, met with even louder protest by those who viewed its construction as a thinly-veiled effort to impose a post-Sandinista national myth and as an affront to those most affected by economic hardship. In contrast to the solidarity of popular religion and the Christian Base Communities, the established Catholic Church hierarchy that supported the project was demonstrably insensitive to the cathedral's reception (Linkogle 1996:220–221).

In the midst of such controversy, large signs assaulted residents and visitors to the city, proclaiming that in the new Managua "The Mayor Gets Things Done" and "Everything is Changing." Despite Alemán's well-known reputation for corruption, many Managuans were taken in by the appearance of change, even if the charismatic mayor was unable to erase

evidence of continued suffering in the city. All around Managua were pronouncements of the generous funding supplied by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) for the construction of plazas and parks. Close observers might also note the scrawled graffiti of those less taken in by such cosmetic changes and by the neoliberal turn of government. One wall carried the message, "ESAF = hambre," or the structural adjustment program imposed by the IMF means hunger. Such are the everyday contrasts in Managua in the 1990s.



ESAF = HAMBRE

The 1996 election of Alemán as president was not surprising given the success of his urban "clean-up" campaign and the fragmented state of the Sandinista opposition. Whereas Violeta Chamorro's government sought to assuage conflict and cultivate the support of the Sandinistas by taking a middle road, Alemán's Liberal Alliance signaled a more significant turn to the Right. Economic adjustments and political conservatism have meant worsening conditions for the majority of Nicaraguans. In Managua an estimated sixty percent are unemployed or underemployed. Yet in this period of shifting alliances, an unholy pact has been established between Alemán, widely regarded as the most corrupt of presidents, and Daniel Ortega, whose personal and political reputation has been seriously damaged by his stepdaughter's public allegations.⁵

The neoliberal desire to attract foreign investment and to cater to middle-class longings is evident in the changing face of the city. The urban center had remained a void along the earthquake's fault line, but mayor Alemán built a monstrous new cathedral in the forsaken area. As president, he was determined to create a city center adjacent to it. Now, a huge traffic circle enhanced with fountains and colored lights stands as a monument to modernity. Alongside it, a commercial mall and tourist hotel are under construction. With streets renamed, to erase memories of the revolutionary past, there is a great confusion of names and places in the

city. One barrio which had been named for a Sandinista martyr was given its pre-revolutionary name of "Salvadorita," after dictator Anastasio Somoza's mother. People resist the erasures by describing locations as "*donde fue*," where something was before, and by continuing to use names assigned during the revolutionary decade. Some NGOs, women's health clinics, and political offices are maintaining oppositional identities by creating new murals at their centers, but for the most part, urban popular culture is eclipsed.⁶



Mural outside a Managua women's health clinic

Neoliberalism and the Urban Landscape: Gender, Class, and Power

Nicaragua currently faces the dilemma of other Latin American countries following the neoliberal development model. As expressed in a recent report of the research center Nitlapán (Envío 1998a:5), "The dilemma is this: Nicaragua either resolves its poverty building respected institutions and democracy or else anti-democratic authoritarianism will drag it into a bottomless pit of misery, backwardness and social decomposition." Under the Sandinistas, the country was already experiencing great difficulties as the Contra war endured and the state-planned economy depended heavily on subsidies to prop up national production. In 1990, the UNO government introduced structural adjustment measures in a market-driven economy that emphasized export production and cuts in social spending. At the time, Chamorro's government insisted that although the adjustment would be "painful," the country would "get well and soon would be fine" (ibid.:7). The Liberal Party government of Alemán has continued the same policies, only more ruthlessly, and poverty has deepened.

What has neoliberalism meant for Managua and how are gender and class differences manifest in the present urban context? As public-sector employment was cut after the 1990 elections, Sandinistas, and women among them, were especially affected. The conservative political climate has put pressure on women to leave formal-sector jobs and return home, even when most of them must provide for their families' livelihood. Under a new government plan, many state employees in Managua accepted severance pay and began to sell items informally from their homes. Ironically, the expansion of the informal sector is regarded as a national problem rather than as a survival strategy for individuals lacking alternatives. Thus, a result of neoliberal economic policy is that more women are out of the paid work force and are now seeking informal sources of income (Babb 1996).

The absence of women in state-sector employment is part of a broader departure of women from public culture. Women had been actively organized into urban cooperatives under the Sandinistas, but the neoliberal favoring of larger economic interests and export manufacturing took a heavy toll on these smaller industries, which often employ just five to ten workers. While some cooperatives have been refashioned as microenterprises that are more congenial to the market economy, many others have failed. Of four cooperatives with strong membership by women that I followed through the 1990s, two are closed: These include a bakers co-op and a welders co-op which disbanded because of lack of work and “husbands' jealousy” of their wives' working. A group of artisans who viewed their cooperative increasingly as “a museum artifact” in the market economy, sought a new identity as an association of independent producers working under one roof. The last cooperative, a group of seamstresses who worked at home and then met in a central place to sell their clothing and to hold meetings, lost its lease and continues as a cooperative in name only out of loyalty. When I returned to Managua after six months away and looked for the women in their store on the edge of the sprawling Eastern Market, the place had simply vanished. The facade was entirely gone, incorporated into the newly enlarged storefront of a neighboring business (Babb 1997, 1998).

Erasures of women's spaces in the city were increasingly common as opportunities to participate in the wider economy began to shrink. While women were less active in the formal sector, their presence in informal trades (often hidden from view) and even begging (in public) was greater. One area of girls' and women's involvement that has expanded during the last decade is prostitution. It is not unusual to see young women on the streets near the Intercontinental Hotel late at night and on streets near the main post office at mid-day. A young mother I'd known for some time appeared to be dressed for this line of work when I saw her during my last visit, though I couldn't bring myself to ask her about it directly. She told me that she irons clothes and cleans for a neighbor several times a week. But that would hardly support her family. Meanwhile, boys and men using

drugs and in gangs are seen more often on the streets, and crime is rampant in the barrios, making such areas more dangerous for women, as well as for men.⁷ In Managua, life is indeed hard as conditions produced by neoliberalism leave people with few alternatives.⁸



Extended family in Managua settlement

In a city in which almost half the households are headed by women, gender differences in family responsibilities are marked. Education and health-care costs are beyond the reach of many because of privatization and spending cuts, with the result that women have even greater demands on them at home as they pick up the slack of reduced state support. Traditional family values are invoked to shore up the need for private services. New school texts produced with AID funds and introduced during the UNO government's first year endorsed legal marriage and opposed abortion, presenting elementary students with images of mothers caring for families while fathers were out working. The government program to cut back on state-sector employment and to encourage the growth of family businesses disproportionately affected women workers, many of whom began selling items from their homes. The Latin American invocation of the division between *casa/calle* (house/street), whereby to be respectable women must remain in the private sphere while men may roam widely in the public sphere, has made its return to Managua.⁹ In the current context of escalating crime and violence in the city, it is notable that families of even modest means are putting up iron bars on windows and doors, and women lock themselves in their homes for their own protection. Unfortunately, recent reports suggest that domestic violence is so prevalent that one in three women in the country is affected, so the home may be no refuge for women.¹⁰

As other scholars of Latin America have noted (e.g., Radcliffe and Westwood 1996:134–140), discourses of democracy and nationhood are frequently gendered and claims to citizenship are distinct for women and

men. Social movements and political upheavals have often provided the context for renegotiating gender and sexual identities, and these are inflected by race and class differences as national identities are constituted. Thus, the Sandinista revolution incorporated women as militants and as mothers of heroes and martyrs and later brought women into thirty percent of the elected positions in the FSLN. This gave women greater access to the public sphere yet stopped short of transforming gender relations in the family and society. The UNO's conservative gender ideology reinscribed traditional family values, though in a situation that necessarily depends on many women seeking work outside the home. While Violeta Chamorro represented a woman firmly committed to family as wife (she is the widow of the martyr Pedro Joaquín Chamorro), as mother, and, finally, as a maternal figure as president, the inability of most Nicaraguan women to match the ideal of remaining home with family has never been more apparent. Indeed, many women are actively resisting that ideal after a decade of social mobilization under the Sandinistas and with the further support of a growing feminist movement.

Cultural Politics: Shifting Terrain

In recent years, neoliberalism and a process of globalization have brought about notable physical changes in Managua, accompanied by deeper changes in the national political economy and in gender and class relations. Differential access to space and place is more pronounced as the city develops areas that are essentially off limits to women and low-income people. Jobs are harder to find, street vendors are unable to sell at traffic circles, modern supermarkets carry luxury goods that only the wealthy can afford, and restaurants and entertainment centers cater to the elite. Furthermore, as Kunzle (1995:24) writes of the last administration:

How does the UNO government imagine the visual environment of a Nicaragua “rescued” from Sandinista “tyranny”? What new artistic policy is now being offered? A dismally familiar and aesthetically degraded commercial one. Miami is now the model, the true cultural capital of Nicaragua. All the old revolutionary and public-service billboards are gone, swallowed by a forest of commercial advertisement sprouting up everywhere in Managua—even obscuring famous viewpoints—as a veneer of petty enterprise fueled from the United States spreads over generalized and deepening poverty.

This point is illustrated in the present period of the Alemán presidency by the gala opening of a McDonald's Restaurant, which took place just after my last trip to Nicaragua in 1998 (Grant Gallup, personal

communication). Located in the Plaza España at the new Güegüense traffic circle, the hamburger restaurant's grand opening was attended with fanfare by distinguished guests including the country's vice president and by Ronald McDonald, whose arrival briefly shut down the international airport. The vice president announced that with the opening of McDonald's, "Nicaragua is taking off its loin cloth," a candidly racist (and sexist) reference to the nation's indigenous peoples, their culture, and their own fast food such as *baho* (a traditional rural dish popular in the city).¹¹

The shopping center in the new downtown area, the Metrocentro Commercial Complex, carries clothing manufactured by Perry Ellis and Calvin Klein, and has shops including Benetton, Guess, Levi's, and The Gap. In the mall, a coffee cart serves espresso and cappuccino. But few shoppers were around when I visited, and certainly very few Nicaraguan women I know could dream of paying the prices in these stores. Less than a month after Hurricane Mitch devastated the country, one Nicaraguan newspaper proclaimed:

To speak of economic growth, there must be palpable proof that demonstrates the improved economic conditions of a society. And in Nicaragua, the grand opening of the Metrocentro Commercial Complex is a good example of this... The installation of famous international franchises supports that evidence... The effects caused by the devastating power of Mitch can be mitigated by constructions such as this, providing a response to the demands for recreation and relaxation—now offered in Metrocentro, all under the same roof. [Rocha 1998:49; *La Tribuna*, 26 November 1998]

Thus, a shopping mall is configured as offering welcome relief from the country's grim everyday realities. Yet as the city center is remade to satisfy the consumption desires of a small elite, a far greater number of women will be found stretching their slight earnings in crowded marketplaces in outlying areas of Managua.

Other changes are occurring in the city to erase the memory of the revolution. Not surprisingly, the Plaza de la Revolución (still the site of large Sandinista gatherings each year) has been renamed Plaza de la República. And Alemán recently issued a decree to change the name of the national baseball stadium, since 1979 named for the hero who took the life of the first Somoza family dictator, renaming it after Denis Martínez, the Nicaraguan-born pitcher who made it to the U.S. Major Leagues. Ironically, Alemán has also declared that a monument to Augusto César Sandino will be erected on the edge of Managua in honor of the revolutionary hero's defense of national sovereignty in the early part of this century. This appropriation, perhaps intended to make Sandino safe for national consumption, has been met by silence among the FSLN leadership. Meanwhile, the president's predilection for grandiose projects has resulted in plans to construct a "John Paul II Plaza of Faith," the

largest plaza in Central America, as well as a new presidential palace in the ruins left by the earthquake (Envío 1999a:28–31).

That women are experiencing the particularly harsh effects of current economic conditions is readily apparent, but the ways in which gender and social class figure in the context of neoliberalism are also revealed in the cultural climate. One of the first policy measures taken by the Sandinista government was the official elimination of sexism in advertising, but early in the 1990s women's bodies were once again on public display on city billboards and in newspapers and magazines. Ads for the Nicaraguan beers, Toña and Victoria, were notorious for equating women with thirst-quenching "blonde" and "dark" alcoholic beverages. Beauty-pageant photos and reportage often made the front page of the national newspapers (including the Sandinista *Barricada*) and the right-wing daily hailed the Miss Nicaragua beauty pageant the most important cultural event of the year, commenting that this is "possible only in a real democracy" (*La Prensa* 1991, quoted in Kunzle 1995:xv).¹² Soon after my most recent trip to Nicaragua, Casa Ave María, where I've stayed in recent years, experienced a major fire. The damage included the marring of murals in an indoor patio by a well-known artist depicting the country's heroic women. Whether the cause of the fire was accidental, stemming from faulty wiring, or vandalism, another monument to the revolution (and one of the few dedicated to women) suffered; in this case, fortunately, reconstruction will prevent the spread of cultural amnesia that has descended on the country.

The annual festival of Santo Domingo, Managua's patron saint, serves to illustrate a recent cultural contestation over urban space that is inflected by both social class and gender. The most widely celebrated festival in Managua, Santo Domingo begins on the evening of July 31 when crowds gather at Las Sierritas church on the outskirts of Managua, where the statue of the saint resides. After a night of dancing and drinking, the statue of Santo Domingo is taken from the church and carried through the city to the Santo Domingo church, where it remains for ten days. During that period, there are masses and festivities until the statue is returned to Las Sierritas church. In 1992, there were 50,000 people accompanying the statue on its journey between the churches and across Managua. Regarded as a saint of the common people, Santo Domingo attracts a boisterous, costumed following, who take pleasure in smearing grease on unwitting bystanders, particularly if they appear to be of the privileged classes ("tarring" is a reference to African slaves who came to Nicaragua—thus there is a racialized element in this practice). As mayor, Alemán used his power and economic influence to alter the route of the procession so that it bypassed a popular barrio, angering those who planned the event as well as the working-class residents of the barrio. An observer of the festival noted that it is not only a class phenomenon, but a gendered one; it is "masculine" in the sense that men are freer to engage in the drunken merriment of the street, while women are more often observers, or remain

at home. Although a certain degree of transgression is expected in the festival, at a symbolic level as well as a practical one, both class and gender differences in the use of public and private space are reinscribed (Linkogle 1996:199–208).

Remaking the City

Returning to Fox's (1972) question of anthropology's contribution to the study of cities, we may ask how developments in Managua shed light on the situation in the rest of the country as well as on the position of Nicaragua in an increasingly globalized world. As a researcher in Managua's Nitlapán institute inquired in a study of the area affected by Mitch's devastation:

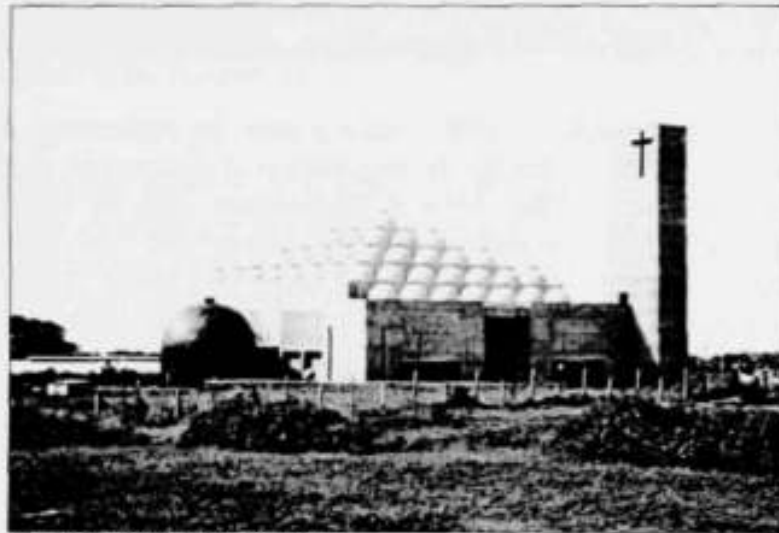
Is this [neoliberalism] the model on which business, the media, and the government are gambling? What possible benefits can such a model bring to the peasants of rural Nicaragua? Will the shopping centers sell farmers' milk or artisans' furniture? Wiwili milk will not be an ingredient in any of the milkshakes sold there. It will have no chance of reaching the glasses or tables of the transnational fast-food stores. There will be a place for imported perfumes, but not Matagalpa strawberries; for Kerns cold cuts, but not for pineapples and pitahayas from La Concha or for Pantasma's bananas; for Quaker oatmeal, but not for Somotillo jicaro seeds; for Kellogg's corn flakes, but not for *pinolillo*; for Nike tennis shoes, but not for shoes made in Masaya; for the Rolling Stones, but not for Camilo Zapata... [Rocha 1998:49]

He concludes by comparing the obstacles facing Nicaragua's poor to an ever-present Mitch, and calls on the city to pay heed to the country's predicament. Certainly, the contradictions of Nicaragua's transnational development process for the entire country have never been more apparent than in present-day Managua, when viewed from the vantage point of its growing multinational free trade zone and failing small industries, or its privileged elite and rising unemployment, divided Left, and cultural disaffection.

I believe that we need to reconsider Fox's call for an urban anthropology that goes beyond the romantic and the exotic in specific locales within cities, and pursue a more holistic (and multi-layered) approach to cities and (world) society. My larger project considers ways that Managua, as the capital of Nicaragua, has figured in the imaginations of many beyond its borders and the substantial implications this mythic construction has had for the nation and its people. Within the city, I have

examined the strategic role of barrios as well as households and workplaces as sites of struggle over democratic participation, but I have also considered the city as a whole as a site of negotiation over the terms of citizenship.

Urbanization and a rightward turn toward neoliberalism are both features of post-Sandinista Nicaragua, and in that historical context my research in Managua documents the way that urban space has become increasingly circumscribed for low-income people and especially for women. There is more to the story, however, as those who are experiencing the harshest dislocations are also participating in social movements that are changing the political landscape. Women, indigenous people, and environmentalists are among the key players in current cultural struggles, often joined by Sandinista intellectuals and activists who see a need to move beyond the political-economic debates of the past and to learn from cultural identity-based movements as a force for social justice and national reconciliation.



New Cathedral of Managua

Ironically, and in much the same way that the earthquake served to mobilize a popular insurrection against the Somoza dictatorship three decades ago, Hurricane Mitch and the Nicaraguan government's weak response to it may have catalyzed the efforts of diverse groups in the country—social movements, nongovernmental organizations, and unions—to form a broad coalition acting on behalf of civil society. As many as three hundred organizations had already established forms of coordination around their own specific interests, but now are working in coalition to propose an integrated response to the national situation. In addition to emergency relief, they are raising concerns that range from health, education, environmental protection, the economy, community development, children and youth, to women's empowerment and

sexuality. The coalition has claimed that “We do not want to build the ‘same’ country,” as they promote a more inclusive, democratic society that attends to the human rights of all Nicaraguans (Envío 1998b:12–13). As an urban site, Managua has been at the center of discussion of these new forms of social mobilization and of the creative tensions they produce in the city and society.¹³ In Nicaragua as elsewhere in Latin America (Alvarez, et al. 1998), we must wait and see how effectively a new political culture is able to challenge the illusion and disillusion offered up as modernity in neoliberalism’s wake.

Finally, it may be useful to place this discussion of Managua within the broader framework of cities in relation to nations and the world. Up until this point, I have presented Nicaragua and its capital as fairly exceptional and have emphasized the nation’s historical uniqueness. Others who have traveled to Nicaragua have noted their desire to capture the particular features of a location that underwent such remarkable change, much of which is coming undone in the post-Sandinista period. One ethnographer who identified with the revolutionary project expressed well the effort to “salvage what can be recorded before difference disappears” (Martin 1994:2).¹⁴ Precious though this history may be, we can benefit from the added insights of some recent scholarly analyses of cities.

Holston and Appadurai (1999) make a case for redirecting attention from nations to cities as sites for the negotiation of citizenship, democracy, and social inclusion. They offer a postmodern spin to Fox’s earlier formulation of studies *in* and *of* the city, noting that “the city can be pretext and context, form and substance, stage and script” (ibid:15–16). Their work points toward a more complex approach to cities as strategic arenas for negotiations among social groups and, often, as a staging ground for the project of nation-building. While a unified notion of “the city” has now been fractured by richer concepts of difference that acknowledge the multiple experiences of social subjects based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, and so on, cities (in the plural) are the undisputed, paradigmatic places where these differences converge and play themselves out (Jacobs and Fincher 1998). We may be guided by the work of geographers, anthropologists, and others who have drawn on the “politics of location” first articulated by writer Adrienne Rich (1986) to elaborate an understanding of the ways that the “local” (in this case the city) is always implicated in broader national and transnational processes.

As we map differences in urban sites in an effort to chart not only social inequalities and power differentials but also manifestations of struggles for national inclusion, or citizenship, we may be struck by a question posed recently by sociologist Saskia Sassen: “Whose city is it?” (Sassen 1999). Clearly, new claims are being made by new social subjects even in the face of globalizing processes of exclusion. But the odds are generally set against the most marginal of urban players, including women, low-income residents, and racial minorities. Struggles over

fundamental rights to social participation, economic livelihood, and indeed physical space in which the stakes are particularly high and the risks great are being waged in cities around the globe. State and civil society will negotiate the terms by which these struggles are resolved.



Model of the commercial center

Turning once again to Managua, we may observe that as the city is remade it is increasingly the space of an elite. Huge traffic circles and commercial centers mock a more thorough and democratic modernization process that has yet to occur. City streets and places are renamed and murals covered over in an effort to erase the past, a time when social and economic differences were challenged and overturned. The stark inequalities are apparent once again, and the cosmetic changes to the city cannot hide the poverty and hardship of the majority. The wealthy venture out to urban locations designed for their convenience, then drive home to safe zones at a comfortable distance from sites of obvious misery. They shield themselves as much as possible from crime and other social problems, constructing higher walls and better security systems for their homes, and hiring armed guards to patrol their neighborhoods.¹⁵ In so doing, they create segregated enclaves that, in Managua as elsewhere in Latin America, alter the character of public space and public life and enforce rules of inclusion and exclusion (Caldeira 1999).

To a certain degree, the streets of Managua may be left to those who cannot afford to retreat to enclaves; youth gangs are growing in the city's barrios, beggars gather outside the new cathedral, and gay men find a social space in the ruins of the old cathedral. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the public sector is inhospitable to many who are marginalized in society. Women are among the less privileged groups who are affected most by these changes. Some earn a living in the multinational companies established in the Zona Franca (free trade zone) in the outskirts of the city.

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