

Housing Justice in the Aftermath of the 1985 Earthquake in Mexico City

[intro music]

Isabel: A major earthquake hit Mexico City in 1985. It devastated the city center, took thousands of lives, and leveled thousands of buildings. Urban politics were reshaped in its wake. But what does this have to do with housing? It turns out a whole lot. Welcome to Just Housing, and our episode on housing in the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. We are three students in Urban Studies who are interested in how cities respond to natural disasters and how natural disasters become social disasters. As this case shows, these moments often reveal what's going on underneath the surface in a city. At the same time, natural disasters and social responses can transform the urban landscape. First, we'll look at the immediate impacts of the Mexico City earthquake, including how urban residents and government officials organized emergency housing in the days and weeks that followed the impact. Then, we'll show how Mexico City's residents mobilized to demand that the government rebuild housing on the residents' own terms over the course of years. Along the way, we'll try to understand why the built environment was especially vulnerable to collapse and how the housing movement was able to come together so quickly and effectively in the late 20th century.

Isabel: For now though, let's start on a cool fall morning in September, 1985. A famous chronicler of the earthquake, Elena Poniatowska, is just waking up to a rumbling bed. She begins to understand the severity of the earthquake when she hears glass crashing around her [glass shattering]. And when she gets out of bed, she can't move without clinging to the walls. It lasts two minutes, and then she looks outside. A reporter describes the scene.

Reporter: Darkness on a street in Mexico City. Crews are digging through the rubble of a collapsed building looking for bodies, looking for survivors. Spotlights illuminate the devastation here. There are crushed cars before me. Bricks have fallen across the street.

Christa: To understand Mexico City's experience of the earthquake, we have to look at the city's geography. The city was originally built about 700 years ago by Mexica people in the middle of a lake. The city's leaders divided it into four sections, with four causeways radiating out from the center. Hundreds of thousands of people lived there when the Spanish arrived in the early 1500s and took over the city. Now, the center of Mexico City is still where the center of the Aztec capital called Tenochtitlan used to be. Except the lake that surrounded it has been steadily drained, and the city's area has grown to cover much more ground. But it's not like the lake never existed – you just have to look down to realize it. The city is built on top of a clay soil that is still soft and full of water from the former lake in the Valley of Mexico. This is an important part of the city's geology when it comes to earthquakes. When an earthquake arrives from the coast, its seismic waves are amplified hundreds of times because of the soft soil [rumbling]. The history of Mexico City, of Tenochtitlan, is held in its soil. Much like the city's built environment, social networks, and political systems reflect its history. And all of them shaped and were changed by the course of the earthquake in 1985.

Sophie: The devastation from the earthquake was felt throughout the city, but the destruction was concentrated at its center. The center of the city not only housed major government infrastructure but was also home to hundreds of thousands of people. Four districts were hit hard – Benito Juárez, Gustavo A Madero, Venustiano Carranza, and especially Cuauhtémoc. The Cuauhtémoc

district was made up of many different neighborhoods. It had old, dense, and working class neighborhoods called vecindades, along with middle-class neighborhoods and older public housing buildings. This district didn't just have neighborhoods with different classes and old building types. It also was the part of the city where most of the government buildings and all kinds of institutions and businesses were located. Vendors, factories, and shops all near the main square existed alongside hospitals, museums, churches, and the national palace.

Christa: How was it possible to have all of these different neighborhoods and types of land use in one district? The answer has to do with the history of housing policy in Mexico City. Don't worry, we'll come right back to that. What we can focus on now is what this combination of neighborhoods, businesses, and government buildings meant for the center of the earthquake's destruction. When it hit, both government communication and services were devastated along with dense residential areas. This caused a major disruption of the services that citizens relied on. Hundreds of thousands of people were left without housing, work, transportation, sustenance, telephone access, or medical treatment. Many government institutions assessed their internal damage before directing their attention to the surrounding community. The government's delayed and inadequate response left a gap in authority that volunteers and non-governmental organizations would fill.

Sophie: What did this mean for emergency housing? With the collapse of thousands of housing units, emergency shelter emerged as a necessity. So many shelters emerged, in fact, that it was hard to keep track of all of them. One local said after the earthquake that there were dozens of shelters across the city when they woke up, and hundreds by the afternoon! Organizations like

churches and schools across the city contributed to these shelters, whether with resources or space. There was clearly a substantial amount of space dedicated to emergency shelter. But even so, logistical problems arose because of the haste with which these shelters were created. There was also poor coordination between them. These temporary homes saw an influx of people and supplies that were difficult to manage. Social workers took over managing the shelters, while volunteers were assigned to tasks like providing meals, and ensuring adequate sanitation. In this case we can see disorganization and lack of coordination alongside an outpouring of support for victims of the earthquake. This first phase of housing after the earthquake reveals some of the challenges to the physical recovery of the city in the absence of government authority.

Christa: Despite the number of shelters, most people who had lost their homes to the earthquake went to stay with family or friends. This was not uncommon before the earthquake, when Mexico City already faced a serious housing shortage. But what is even more critical to our story is that many former residents of the *vecindades* refused to go to shelters and instead took to the streets. They stayed amid the rubble of their neighborhoods and planned to protect their rights to live there.

Sophie: In the week following the earthquake, organizations across the city gathered resources for emergency aid. They also made plans and demands for rebuilding the city. Three days after the earthquake, a government commission recommended freezing rents and evictions to help with the dual crisis in housing and employment. The commission also suggested finding unused housing to give to victims of the earthquake, but realized this plan was ineffective considering the housing shortage. Political parties, unions, and groups made up of earthquake victims also

made demands of the government in the week that followed the earthquake. As we'll see later, just over a week after the earthquake, thousands of demonstrators rallied in the center of the city to demand government support for earthquake victims.

Christa: Before we see what came of this flurry of activity, let's go back to the Cuauhtémoc district and its housing history. Because the housing instability and advocacy that occurred after the earthquake weren't unprecedented in this district. A good place to start is in the 1920s. In this decade, rents in the district shot up with population growth, and popular housing movements formed in response. In the 1940s, the government froze the rents in *vecindades*, the dense neighborhoods of the district. This had two implications by the time the 1980s came around. One, many residents or their families had lived in their homes since the 40s, or at least the 50s. Two, landlords didn't contribute much to their buildings with low rents, so they let them fall apart. Or they tried to take down the housing so they could put in buildings with higher profits. Housing movements had resisted this pattern for decades. Then came urban renewal in the 1970s, a government project that demolished *vecindades* to put in highways and more expensive housing or businesses. Even for the *vecindades* that remained untouched, evictions increased as property values did. By 1985, residents were committed to staying in the spaces that they and their families had fought to hold on to, and they had a lot of experience in demanding better conditions from the government.

Sophie: Gabriel Sama grew up in Mexico City and was 14 years old when the earthquake hit. He remembered the chaos and the aftermath of that day when he was interviewed for the 9/11 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project. His words are read by Alfonso Velasco. As he compares

the events, it's clear that the actions of residents in the wake of the earthquake made an impression on him.

Alfonso: "lo único comparable que había vivido yo en cuanto a la respuesta social y la magnitud, y la seriedad del problema..."

Isabel: Sama is saying, "The only comparable thing that I've lived through considering the social response and the magnitude, the seriousness of the problem, was the earthquake in Mexico City in '85, which killed 20,000 people, which shook Mexican society, but also generated an instinct of solidarity that brought out the best that Mexican society could give"

Sophie: But Sama was also critical of politicians' response to this support and solidarity between residents.

Alfonso: "Después ese terminó, los políticos tuvieron la magia o la osadía de apropiárselo..."

Isabel: Sama continues, "When this was over, politicians had the audacity to appropriate it and use it for political ends. This is what we see, what we can't lose sight of, that in the end, the '85 earthquake in Mexico was a question of individuals, of human beings which pained us greatly."

Sophie: Sama reminds us of the humanity of the catastrophe, both in the pain of its toll and the massive response from urban residents. He also brings us to the question of the government's role in the earthquake. First, we're going to have to introduce some of the main organizations in

this story, governmental and not. One key player is the Renovation of Popular Housing Program or RHP. Another is the Coordinadora Única de Damnificados or CUD, which was made up of a bunch of neighborhood associations like, for example, the Council of Residents' Organizations of Tlatelolco. Let's see what happened when Mexico's government and Mexico City's residents had to decide how to rebuild from the rubble.

Christa: First we'll look specifically at the government's response to the earthquake. To understand how the government dealt with the disaster, we have to know a little more about its structure. Mexico City is the nation's capital and is a Federal District, just like Washington, DC. It's governed independently of the surrounding states. Mexico's national government is fragmented, with authority divided between the individual state governments, the municipalities, the national ministries, and the Department of the Federal District. Neither the Mexican federal government nor the government at the metropolitan level had extensive disaster plans in place. As a result, the responsibilities pertaining to emergency response were assigned to the Mexican Army. Without getting too specific about the responsibilities and approaches of Mexico City's government, its organizational structure was highly complex. There was no unified effort at reconstruction and recovery after the earthquake. The destruction following the earthquake actually revealed significant construction violations and governmental corruption. These violations became apparent in the debris and collapsed buildings following the disaster. For example, in the debris and building remnants, a number of dead bodies were discovered. Many of these bodies showed signs of torture. The bodies were located under police stations and other public city buildings that had collapsed. Governmental corruption was nothing new in the 1980s. Mexico City had historically been a place where the government catered to the desires of the

economic elite at the expense of working class citizens. In the days after the earthquake, this corruption became evident in ways that drastically impacted the city. The police looted buildings, and no authority figures prevented them from doing so. The army gave their emergency resources to the soldiers, rather than victims. Citizens had to pay bribes just to get the bodies of family members taken away, or even just to return home. The earthquake of 1985 reinforced these preexisting practices in which public officials abused their position for personal gain.

Sophie: In a similar vein, the damage caused by the earthquake revealed a number of housing-related infractions that had flown under the radar. These infractions specifically involved the violation of construction standards—a problem which, when brought to the public eye, resulted in even greater mistrust in governmental disaster assistance. Newer buildings that should have been able to withstand more of the earthquake's impact were utterly demolished. Then, a decision to reallocate earthquake reconstruction funds, made prior to the earthquake, came to light. The authorities had decided to take this funding and use it to repay a portion of Mexico's foreign debt. This decision benefited the financial institutions and elite of the country while creating an obstacle to the reconstruction of housing for thousands of working class citizens. The earthquake revealed this governmental corruption all at once, although it had been going on long before 1985. But on the bright side, a citizen-led reconstruction initiative was successful! An entire housing movement emerged as a response to the physical devastation. Going forward, we're going to discuss this movement and focus on one particular program—one of the largest reconstruction projects since World War 2.

Christa: A week after the earthquake, a massive protest thrust the experiences and demands of vecindades residents into full view. Victims of the earthquake had already been strategically occupying the streets of their neighborhoods. Now they marched to protest the shortcomings of local authorities and vecindad owners. Their demands included the expropriation of vecindades and permanent residence in the district. The rapid organization of this movement owed to the neighborhoods' histories of tenant resistance and networks of representative associations. These groups were able to contact and communicate with residents impacted by the earthquake. They could also formulate and communicate specific demands to the press and authorities. The protest drew a lot of attention and led to meetings with numerous government officials. This was the beginning of the government's official recognition of the movement. Less than a week after the march, representatives met with the president himself and presented their demands. In addition to their previous demands of expropriation and permanent residence, they also asserted their right to city services, aid, and a participatory role in reconstruction. Within weeks, the government responded by expropriating thousands of buildings, inhabited by hundreds of thousands of people, and creating an agency to work with earthquake victims. You might be wondering what the protesters' central demand, expropriation, even means, let alone why it was so important. Expropriation meant that vecindades, formerly private property, became public property. Through this legal change, the government could guarantee the continued residence of earthquake victims in their neighborhoods.

Sophie: The housing agency created in response to the movement's demands was called the Renovacion Habitacional Popular program, which we will refer to as RHP going forward. This program not only oversaw the construction of tens of thousands of housing units, but it also set

new standards for housing construction going forward. The program successfully constructed and repaired severely damaged housing, all concentrated in the central parts of Mexico City, where the earthquake produced the greatest impact. In just two years, the RHP was able to construct and restore over 48 thousand housing units!

Christa: The housing movement didn't stop with the fulfillment of its initial demands, like the creation of the RHP. Instead, it changed shape and continued to claim a seat at the table in the reconstruction process. After months of protest by a now multi-class movement of earthquake victims and changes in the leadership of the RHP, the government and the movement reconciled. Conflict persisted, but the RHP produced a document titled the *Convenio de Concertacion Democratica para la Reconstruction de Vivienda del RHP*. This document was signed by more than a hundred public institutions, professional associations, universities, tech support groups, and international organizations a few months after the earthquake. Through this document, these various sectors agreed to collaborate and direct efforts towards the pressing housing needs of the earthquake victims. This negotiation both defined and standardized the process of reconstructing housing going forward, as well as included the demands of the earthquake victims. For example, it recognized the demand that reconstruction uphold physical cultural characteristics of the urban environment. This document co-opted non-governmental organizations into the government's planning and action process, and empowered community participation in reconstruction. It also affirmed victims' rights to stay in their neighborhoods. Reconciliation through the document benefitted the government by increasing its institutional legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens and the world. In addition to the long-lasting impact the RHP had on housing reconstruction, this program produced incredible contributions to the physical landscape of the city.

Sophie: Most importantly, the RHP expropriated damaged properties, with a strong constituency of low income housing. This program shines in comparison to others, and it was even deemed successful by the community. It was executed at an incredible speed—to construct over 48K units in just two years is truly sensational. The program had the means to be successful because of loans from the World Bank. In total, the program had around 392 million dollars to spend. The program also created greater security and long-term investment in homeownership. Previously, most citizens had rented properties, with homeowners comprising only 1% of the community. The RHP empowered families to actually own the new or repaired units. Finally, the program facilitated communication between the community and institutions responsible for planning, as well as coordination between and among institutions. The RHP, directed by the actions of the housing movement, had a lasting impact on the future of housing construction and on the physical repair of Mexico City, while forcing the government to acknowledge and abide by the victims' demands.

Sophie: This moment in history has not been forgotten, as we'll see soon. Luis Fernando Tolentino is the curator of an exhibit in Mexico City called The Right to the City. The exhibit presents documents, photographs, and other materials from urban social movements in Mexico City over the last hundred years. When we spoke, Tolentino gave me a tour of the space. He stopped at each section to show me the words and images up close. Here is Tolentino introducing the exhibit.

Tolentino: Es un proyecto que nace en 2020, antes estos eran edificios de una oficina...

Isabel: It's a project that began in 2020, before these were office buildings, and we started from this position about the right to the city, popular urban social movements, and the exhibit is made up of photographic material that we got or requested from the Casasola archive, the general archive of the nation, and the Museum Archive of photography.

Sophie: Then Tolentino explains what it means to have a right to the city.

Tolentino: Que es el acceso de todos los habitantes de la ciudad a cada una cosa de la ciudad...

Isabel: It's the access of all the city's inhabitants to every part of the city. This means that the city isn't only a place to come to work, to study, to have a good time. It's having complete access to it. Public services, recreational services, educational services, the most essential services.

Residents advocate to make decisions about their environment so that they are heard and so they can transform their environment. It's not just the government that dictates guidelines, it's people living the guidelines, who can make the best decision.

Sophie: Tolentino also explains what forms the basis of urban social movements in Mexico City.

Tolentino: Bueno, son organizaciones de vecinos que surgen a raíz de la necesidad de vivienda...

Isabel: They're organizations of neighbors that arise from the need for housing. The problem of housing in Mexico is something historical.

Sophie: Tolentino describes housing movements at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Tolentino: Se forman lo que es el sindicato de inquilinos. También hay que entender que...

Isabel: They form a tenant union. You also have to understand that many of these homes undergo evictions everyday. Imagine this - that at any moment they can evict you and throw your belongings in the street. That's why you have to organize - the people organize when the landlords want to kick someone out.

Sophie: Tolentino then reaches the part of the exhibit dedicated to the movement after the 1985 earthquake:

Tolentino: 7:17 de la mañana, 7:19, ya la ciudadanía se está organizando...

Isabel: At 7:19 in the morning, residents are already organizing. They're organizing to search in the rubble for their loved ones. And what happens? Miguel de la Madrid's government thinks it's appropriate to send in public forces. But only to cordon off the most devastated areas. Through marches, and beginning to look for loved ones, the damnificados start to talk about expropriation. In this case, a lot of organizations participated, and some we still see in national politics today.

Sophie: Mexico City's 1985 earthquake shook the physical and political landscape and forced residents and the government to address the city's underlying issues as they were expressed in its historical infrastructure. Despite efforts from organizations like churches and schools to establish emergency shelters in the disaster's aftermath, logistical problems arose because of the scale of

the disaster and immediate need for aid. Without a decisive disaster plan in place, the Mexican federal and metropolitan governments delegated their supposed duties to the Mexican Army, which only further revealed significant construction violations and government corruption. In response to the government's disorganization, residents took matters into their own hands. They relied on pre-existing movements and networks to demand legislation for reconstruction. Mexico City experienced a catastrophic loss of lives, vital businesses, and housing units. However, through the rapid organization of a citizen-led housing movement and collaboration between the government, organizations, and community members, what resulted was a reconstruction program with the earthquake victims' needs at the forefront. The story and lasting impacts of the housing movement after the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City are now a critical part of the historical memory that guides and fuels the fight for urban housing justice in the present day.

[outro music]