

The Socioeconomic and Environmental Impact of Suburban Growth on Workers in Mexico: Two Photographic Projects by Alejandro Cartagena

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Alejandro Cartagena, a contemporary Mexican photographer (born in the Dominican Republic), created two interconnected photographic projects. The first, *Suburbia Mexicana* (2006-2009), investigates issues that arose related to the unforeseen effects of low-income housing developments established in the urban periphery of Monterrey, Mexico, on the working class. The second project, *Carpoolers* (2011-2012), focuses on the appearance of a distinctive type of carpooling employed by worker-owners due to the lack of public transportation to these isolated tract-home subdivisions. Through the two projects, Cartagena examines how government-subsidized suburban growth impacted the day-to-day lives of workers. In illustrating various stages of housing construction, portraying worker-owners and their families, and documenting a method of ride-sharing, the artist shows not only his concerns about issues related to the environment, construction, and remote locations, but also the strength and character of the new suburban residents and their resourcefulness in finding practical methods for personalizing their homes and managing their daily commute.

Keywords: Alejandro Cartagena, Mexico, photography, low-income housing, workers, suburbia, periphery, environmental issues

Alejandro Cartagena, el fotógrafo mexicano contemporáneo (nacido en la República Dominicana), creó dos proyectos fotográficos interconectados. El primero, *Suburbia Mexicana* (2006-2009), investiga temas relacionados con los imprevistos efectos en la clase trabajadora ejercidos por su ocupación de los nuevos recintos de viviendas para residentes de bajos ingresos establecidos

en la periferia urbana de Monterrey, México. El segundo proyecto, *Carpoolers* (2011–2012), se centra en la aparición de un tipo distintivo de compartir vehículos (*carpooling*) utilizado por los trabajadores-propietarios de casas, debido a la falta de transporte público a aquellas aisladas zonas. En ambos proyectos, Cartagena examina cómo el crecimiento suburbano subsidiado por el gobierno impactó en la vida cotidiana de los trabajadores. Al ilustrar varias etapas de la construcción de las viviendas, retratar a los trabajadores-propietarios y sus familias y documentar el método de viaje compartido específico, el artista muestra no solo sus preocupaciones por temas relacionados con el medio ambiente, la construcción y las ubicaciones remotas, sino también la fuerza y el carácter de los nuevos residentes suburbanos y su ingenio para encontrar métodos prácticos para personalizar sus hogares y efectuar sus viajes diarios.

Palabras clave: Alejandro Cartagena, México, fotografía, viviendas para residentes de bajos ingresos, trabajadores, suburbios, periferia, medioambiente

Introduction

The internationally-recognized photographer Alejandro Cartagena envisioned and produced two distinct yet related photographic projects that address several prevailing and interconnected issues concerning low-income suburban developments and the working class in Mexico.¹ The artist initially shed light on worker-locality struggles with his project *Suburbia Mexicana*, 2006–2009, documenting the social, economic, and environmental impact of government-subsidized tract homes constructed in remote suburbs surrounding one of the largest cities in Mexico. His later photographic investigation, *Carpoolers*, 2011–2012, is an extension of the earlier project, recording a solution devised by suburban residents for the commute to work in the distant city.

Suburbia Mexicana documents suburban sprawl and its consequences in the metropolitan area of Monterrey (Cartagena et al. 2011). While the project was created in five parts, this article focuses on the three photographic series.² In the initial series, *Fragmented Cities*, the communities presented are vast, outlying, low-income housing developments built in the urban periphery and cut off from the

¹ Born in the Dominican Republic in 1977, Alejandro Cartagena went to Mexico at age thirteen. After moving to Monterrey in 1990, his work began to reflect issues related to sites and workers. Cartagena has won numerous awards, and his photographs have been not only exhibited in museums around the world but also reside in collections of private individuals and public institutions. For more information, see his website: <https://alejandrocartergana.com/bio>.

² The five parts of the *Suburbia Mexicana* project are: *Fragmented Cities* (*Ciudades fragmentadas*), *Lost Rivers* (*Ríos perdidos*), *Urban Holes* (*Hoyos urbanos*), *The Other Distance* (*La otra distancia*), and *Portraits of Suburbia* (*Retratos suburbanos*).

central city due to the lack of an adequate public transportation system and infrastructure.³ *Lost Rivers*, the second series, surveys the ecological consequences of the construction, therein documenting the effects of rapid urbanization and the resulting degradation of the local environment, including a drastic reduction in natural water sources (Cartagena et al. 2011). The final series, *Portraits of Suburbia*, focuses on the workers and their families who purchased homes and currently live in these low-income communities.⁴

The second project, *Carpoolers*, a more recent body of work, documents the efforts of these suburban residents to find ways to make the outlying residence a sustainable reality. Many homeowners in the remote subdivisions work in the city; however, due to limited resources, few residents own vehicles. Without access to an expedient, interconnected mass transportation system, a logical solution to the daily commute for these workers is to carpool.

While Cartagena centered his projects on the region surrounding Monterrey, he was aware that this focus could seem limited. However, he noted: "When I started my project, I focused on documenting the Monterrey metro area, but as the project got bigger and I received funding I had serious doubts about sticking to one place. But then through my editing process and sharing the images with some peers, it didn't seem to be a problem that I would talk about the whole of Mexican suburbanization from one particular place because, aesthetically, all these places are the same. So, in a way, the placelessness of suburban America still resonates in my images" (qtd. in Uddin 2010, 14). In other words, the Monterrey metropolitan region can serve as a pertinent example of the problems related to large-scale housing developments in the urban periphery apparent not only across Mexico, but also globally.⁵

In highlighting selected photographs from Cartagena's two projects, this essay will explore the initial desire of workers to own their own home in Mexico, their reasons for choosing a government-subsidized loan, and the various difficulties for worker-residents once they have purchased the houses. In discussing the issues motivating Cartagena, a number of his concerns will be addressed, including the lack of infrastructure, the need for services, the absence of environmental protection, and

³ As suggested in a study by Monkkonen (2014), the creation of these vast housing projects in the periphery may be, at least in part, the cause of vacancy in the central cities. Two of the five series in Cartagena's project that relate to developments in the city are not discussed in any depth in this essay: *Urban Holes* (depicting abandoned spaces in downtown Monterrey) and *The Other Distance* (showing urban spaces connecting the wealthy with the new middle and lower classes).

⁴ The term "workers," as used in this essay, relates specifically to the blue-collar working class who qualify for low-income government-subsidized housing loans.

⁵ On large-scale housing developments that have created urbanization of the periphery across Latin America, see Janoschka and Arreortua 2017.

the problem of the chosen housing development locations being both prone to risks and far from job opportunities. Finally, Cartagena's compassion will be revealed in his portraits showing the resilience of the residents through their ability to transform the houses and daily commute to their needs.

Through these two projects, *Suburbia Mexicana* and *Carpoolers*, Cartagena captures elements of suburban growth in Mexico from the initial construction of tract homes to the ensuing difficulties faced by the residents. In the process, he presents viewers with a personal perspective on the divergent motivations of the people involved. Whereas the initial goal of the Mexican government lenders was to provide decent and affordable formal housing to a large percentage of the population, developers and builders seem to have been driven by financial incentives, and worker-buyers were largely inspired by the desire for homeownership and a need to take advantage of loan opportunities.⁶ Taken as a whole, Cartagena's photos offer us a privileged view into the ways that suburban growth has had a strong social, economic, and environmental impact on workers, their homes, and the land.

Background on Tract Homes in the United States and Mexico

Tract housing construction is a developmental strategy that flourished in the postwar United States, generated by a new suburban ideal and standard of living.⁷ Intent on experiencing the American dream of owning their own single-family homes, many urban residents moved to the suburbs.⁸ As Barbara Miller Lane (2015, 4) noted: "Making possible the new houses and their new communities were four major events: the rapid spread of automobile ownership among American families after the war; the rise of a new highway system; the institution of low-interest long-term government loans, especially for veterans; and a new prosperity for lower-income people." This semirural setting offered a haven for a variety of families looking to escape fast-paced and congested city life.⁹

Due to the high demand for affordable suburban homes, developers were impelled to push boundaries. Builders laid out tract-home foundations, framed and completed

⁶ On incentives offered to developers (including acquisition of permits and land), see González-Ochoa 2022 (3).

⁷ "Tract housing" is "a type of housing development in which groups of essentially identical houses are built on a tract of subdivided land." *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, accessed May 22, 2022, https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/tract_housing.

⁸ The American dream has varied over the years but, since the 1920s, has included the ownership of a single-family house. On the changing aspects of the American dream, see Archer 2014.

⁹ On suburban developments in the mid-twentieth century, see Jacobs 2015. On aspects of urban sprawl, see González 2017 and Duany, Plater-Zyerk, and Speck 2000.

using new methods and tools (such as nail guns) that allowed for quick construction (Lane 2015, 23). Each house was designed with a standardized layout, lot size, and driveway for the automobile. Houses in each suburb were set a uniform distance back from the street, creating “a repetitious appearance” (Lane 2015, 11–12).

Even though home ownership has been praised because it promotes neighborhood stability and greater ties with the community, criticism of suburban life and the resulting sprawl has been considerable over the years.¹⁰ A pertinent opinion was put forth in 1961 by Lewis Mumford, an American historian of urban architecture, who seemed to lament the excessive growth of suburbia due to the growing car culture: “As soon as the motor car became common, the pedestrian scale of the suburb disappeared, and with it, most of its individuality and charm. The suburb ceased to be a neighborhood unit: it became a diffused low-density mass, enveloped by the conurbation and then further enveloping it. The suburb needed its smallness, as it needed its rural background, to achieve its own kind of semi-rural perfection” (505).¹¹ Despite criticism, the dream of owning a home of one’s own in the suburbs continued to proliferate across the country.

In the 1950s and 60s, the trends current in the United States—rapid construction of housing developments and dependence on automobiles—spread to Mexico City (Herzog 2015, 28–29, 36).¹² Urban planning scholar Lawrence Herzog (2001, 17–19) referred to the creation of these suburban sites as fragmentation, a facilitated decentralization, and a fatal modernization.¹³ This type of construction eventually reached other large cities including Monterrey in the northwestern part of the country.¹⁴ According to Herzog, these remote mass-produced suburbs “consist mainly of shattered, divided, and fragmented space” (2001, 17), which effectively isolated

¹⁰ On the value of home ownership, see Rohe, Van Zandt, and McCarthy 2013. On the criticism of suburban life, see Archer 2010.

¹¹ In quoting only Mumford’s negative reactions to the suburbs, previous scholars have often misinterpreted his outlook. As apparent in this quote, Mumford did recognize positive qualities in the suburbs, even though he may have stressed the growing negative aspects.

¹² While suburbs in Latin America are distinct from those in the United States, both share similar challenges.

¹³ The term “fragmentation” has been employed by scholars to clarify the results of placing communities far from urban services, jobs, and amenities. “Fragmentation” has also been used in the sense of social segregation, especially in relation to the low-income peripheral developments discussed in this article. See, for example, Marinic and Qureshi 2011 (810); and Rivière d’Arc 2001 (360).

¹⁴ Monterrey is the capital of the state of Nuevo León and home to more than one million people. Another three million residents live in satellite towns and villages in Monterrey’s metropolitan shadow (the metropolitan region of Monterrey is the third largest in Mexico). As an industrialized city situated nearly 160 miles from the border, Monterrey has developed a special relation with the United States (Marinic and Qureshi 2011, 811). See also Karen Irvine, “Introduction,” in Cartagena et al. (2011, 7).

the inhabitants physically and socially from typical amenities of modern-day life (such as mass transportation, stores, and restaurants).

For many families in Mexico, owning your own home was a desire that would go unfulfilled. As Keith Pezzoli (2000, 11) indicates: "It has been impossible for most of Mexico's urban families to purchase a housing unit in the formal (i.e., legally sanctioned) real estate market. Reasons for this include Mexico's widely skewed distribution of income, the rapid rate of urban and demographic growth, the lack of mechanisms for low-income housing finance, and the inability of the economy to generate enough well-paying jobs."

Fairly recently, however, the Mexican government has subsidized the construction of low-income housing communities.¹⁵ Along with supporting this development initiative, the government encouraged workers to buy instead of renting by promoting the idea that home ownership was a gateway to upward mobility.¹⁶ For many buyers, these government-backed homes ultimately proved to be a risky investment. Not only were the subdivisions or settlements located far from both core amenities and jobs, but the homes were frequently built quickly, poorly constructed, or erected on low-quality land either in unsuitable locations or on soil prone to erosion or drought.¹⁷

¹⁵ For more information on finance reforms in Mexico meant to "relieve the housing deficit" in Mexico and "activate the entire economy," see González-Ochoa 2022 (3).

¹⁶ On the critique of the construction of huge developments in Mexico by private development companies, see Esquivel Hernández, Maya Pérez, and Cervantes Borja 2005.

¹⁷ While in the past it has been noted that these areas of the periphery were chosen due to a lack of affordable land in city centers, González-Ochoa (2022) argues that the use of construction techniques for large output drove developments to choose suburban locations with a large land mass.



Figure 1. *Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities, #1*, 2006–2009, archival pigment print.
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

Cartagena turned a critical photographic eye on these communities through his *Suburbia Mexicana* project, focusing on the thousands of tract homes built beyond the Monterrey city limits. These homes combine the row aesthetic of American suburbs with the concrete block-style architecture traditionally used in Mexico (Fry 2008, 40) (figures 1 and 2).¹⁸ Even though concrete was primarily chosen due to the low cost, there was a historical precedent for its use; first introduced in the 1880s, Portland cement had become one of the quintessential building materials used for housing in Mexico by the mid-twentieth century (Fry 2008, 48).¹⁹

¹⁸ Note that not all massive low-income housing developments use concrete blocks. Some builders employed concrete casting techniques which, if used for huge developments, may save money and time (including labor costs) (González-Ochoa 2022, esp., 9–10).

¹⁹ The use of concrete and *tepetzil* blocks (“inexpensive lightweight concrete blocks made from regionally mined volcanic pumice”) to build low-income homes, rather than wood or adobe, assured stability and longevity. Through the employment of machines, blocks could be obtained that were more uniform, economical, and rapidly produced (Fry 2008, 48).



Figure 2. *Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities*, #13, 2006–2009, archival pigment print.
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

The installation of suburban projects in the urban periphery of Monterrey drew mixed responses from community members and outsiders alike. As a resident of the city of Monterrey, Cartagena has emphasized his own concerns about these housing developments in his photos. By conscientiously documenting the construction, he compiled evidence that encourages the viewer to be empathetic and give serious thought to the decisions of the government, the perspective of the builders, and the dilemma of the workers who purchased the homes.²⁰

Cartagena Inspired by US *New Topographics* Photographers

Cartagena's interest in the history of photography resonates throughout his work. This historical connection is largely the fruit of a position he held as digitizer of archives at the Fototeca de Nuevo León, Monterrey, photography center where he was introduced to numerous photographers who ultimately influenced his work in major and enduring ways.²¹ In particular, Cartagena draws inspiration from two American photographers, Robert Adams and Joe Deal, whose work was included in the well-known exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, curated by William Jenkins in 1975.²²

²⁰ Cartagena, personal communication, July 11, 2017.

²¹ Cartagena worked at the center in Monterrey for five years (Cartagena, personal communication, July 13, 2018).

²² This exhibition took place at the George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.

American suburbia hit a peak in construction with low-priced and mass-produced subdivision homes in the late 1960s. The works of Adams and Deal documented views of the rapid development of the contemporary American West. Numerous photographs captured images of bulldozed earth, mounds of debris, and endless rows of repetitive tract houses set amidst a locale of unspoiled nature.

According to the catalog essay by Jenkins (1975, 7), the *New Topographics* artists were determined to create a set of pure, neutral documentary photographs of the rapidly expanding developments across the American landscape. As the title of the exhibition indicates, the focus of the photographers was on landscapes altered by man.²³ In his essay, Jenkins stressed that the artists remained emotionally detached from the ethics and politics of their subject matter, however, recent scholars have argued that, in actuality, this was not the case (Davis 2010, 16–17). Discussing the exhibition, Michael Truscello (2012, 189) convincingly argues that these artists do, in fact, present a sociopolitical stance through their choice of documenting “scarred and decaying byproducts of capitalist exploitation, often vacant spaces for automobility, such as parking lots, highways, or gas stations.”

In spite of the views presented by these recent scholars, Jenkins’s essay remains important for defining a fresh outlook, a break from the past, which opened new paths for future artists (Foster-Rice and Rohrbach 2010, 2–4). While many viewers found the severe black and white *New Topographics* photographs to be too dispassionate or lacking in subjectivity, a number of artists—including Cartagena—were inspired by their juxtaposition of the natural landscape with man-made creations.

Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities in Metropolitan Monterrey

Following the historic influence of the *New Topographics* photography in the United States, Cartagena’s *Suburbia Mexicana* project documents the construction of homes and landscapes of the rapidly-expanding suburbs surrounding Monterrey, Mexico. The photos in the first series of this project, *Fragmented Cities*, show a number of characteristics that are apparent in the work of Adams and Deal. The most obvious similarity lies in the theme of land altered by man. All three photographers have depicted tract homes in a suburban landscape that portray the damage to the

²³ For a number of *New Topographics* photos, see <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/new-topographics> and <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/post-war-american-art/postwar-photography/a/new-topographics>.

surrounding environment.²⁴ Moreover, with streets often devoid of life, Cartagena's images of serial-built houses seem to reflect the surreal ambience of the American suburbs of Adams and Deal.

Nevertheless, Cartagena's work sharply veers from the approach of the two *New Topographics* photographers, who worked strictly with black and white images. The contrasts of color in Cartagena's photos poignantly convey the aftermath of environmental destruction. A good example is *Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities* #24 (fig. 3) in which the use of color highlights the bulldozed and exposed reddish-brown dirt which fills over half the photo, accentuating the open wound of the uprooted earthen landscape in front of the houses. The large plot of flattened, graded, barren land is displaced vividly before us, emphasizing the row of small, mass-produced, standardized, boxy, off-white houses set far in the distance—buildings that appear more like children's blocks than homes. In the foreground, debris is piled in mounds and scattered across the landscape. Even though it is a stunning day with a blue sky filled with wispy white clouds in a picturesque mountainous region, the environment appears desolate and uninviting.

The striking and bold color in Cartagena's photographs not only captures the viewer's attention but also creates an extended three-dimensional space. Adding to the sense of depth, Cartagena tends to shoot photographs at sunset, which heightens contrast and makes the concrete block houses stand out from the landscape.²⁵ In comparison, the black and white photos by *New Topographics* artists seems to flatten space, providing gray and often bleak landscapes.

²⁴ "Robert Adams: Landscapes of Harmony and Dissonance," exhibition notice, The Getty, 2006, <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/adams/>, accessed May 22, 2022.

²⁵ Cartagena, personal communication, March 10, 2015.



Figure 3. *Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities*, #24, 2006–2009, archival pigment print.
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

Cartagena diverges further from the *New Topographics* artists by employing differing tactics for the composition or layout. Adams's and Deal's photos are frequently aerial views or shots taken from higher elevations. In showing us the surrounding space, they often raise the viewer above the streets. Cartagena, in contrast, generally photographs at ground level or at the bottom of the hills. Shooting from such a low angle accentuates both the human qualities and the close alignment of the nearly identical homes.



Figure 4. *Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities, #5*, 2006–2009, Apodaca, Mexico, archival pigment print.
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

Additionally, Cartagena's photos highlight the numerous under-construction or completed rows of houses, whether in valleys, on jagged hillsides, or lining the empty streets.²⁶ Through these compositions, he emphasized the geometrically abstract appearance of the man-made homes whose ordered, serial construction altered the organic character of the landscape. In capturing a wide view of the setting, he emphasizes the geographic isolation of the neighborhood street lined by nearly homogenous homes (see, for example, figure 4).²⁷

While Adams and Deal were born in the United States and the subject of their works was the American West, Cartagena was born in the Dominican Republic and has depicted his current homeland, Mexico. As he has pointed out: "I am not from Mexico, though most of my work is about Mexico, and I am a Mexican citizen now. That really shapes my need to understand where I am."²⁸ Having lived in Monterrey since 1990, the artist is attempting to come to terms with the desires and decisions that led to

²⁶ Cartagena's photographic project, *Suburbia Mexicana*, includes not just images of empty newly built or under-construction houses, but also homes that have been lived in and transformed by the residents (see additional images in the series *People of the Suburbs* on his website <https://alejandrocartergena.com/project-type/projects/?slug=fragmented-cities-5>, or Cartagena, Klint, Irvine, Uddin 2001).

²⁷ Note that the photo, *Suburbia Mexicana: Fragmented Cities, #5*, in figure 4, was chosen for the cover of Lawrence Herzog's book, *Global Suburbs* (2015). In this book, Herzog discusses urban sprawl in a global context that includes Latin America.

²⁸ Cartagena, personal communication, March 10, 2015.

the appearance of these massive suburban subdivisions (Blaustein 2012). In response, he has developed a dialogical view, i.e., a perspective in which a diversity of views is valued; thus, Cartagena is able to see both the positive and the negative aspects of this type of housing. This perspective addresses his multifaceted concerns about the proliferation of tract homes in Mexico, emphasizing that: “The different aspects of *Suburbia Mexicana* propose alternate narratives, which depict a global issue from a local perspective. I feel that my commitment as a photographer is not to denounce our need for a household, but rather to point out the struggle we face following the ideals of a capitalistic system while striving for fairer cities in which to live” (Cartagena et al. 2011, 89). Even though questioning the nature of the housing projects, he recognizes the needs of the workers and upholds the rights of individuals to own a home.

Cartagena’s photographs share a number of apparent aesthetic choices with the *New Topographics* artists, however, his work diverges from their depictions through the power of the diplomatic stance, i.e., being considerate of other views and dealing with them tactfully; Cartagena is able to understand the diverse views of the government, lenders, builders, and various worker-homeowners conveyed through his images. In an unusual and timely approach to the rampant development of tract homes in Mexico, he appears compelled to document the undesirable features and the existing beneficial aspects. In considering a range of issues affecting these communities, he retains both the compassion and understanding of an insider while maintaining the critical and historical distance and perspective of an outsider.

Suburbia Mexicana: Lost Rivers and Aspects of Ecological Change

As in other countries experiencing major urban population growth, Mexico has grave national environmental concerns: inadequate solid waste management, increased air pollution, and insufficient clean water (Connolly 1999). The type of urbanization in which substantial populations live in proximity to large cities increases the solid waste generated at the same time as the quality of the air and access to fresh water are decreased.²⁹

The growing problems in remote suburbs, such as those in Monterrey, were heightened by rapid housing development and aggravated by oversight in planning a corresponding infrastructure. The lack of public transportation to these peripheral developments has increased the number of vehicles using the roads, resulting in traffic congestion and contributing to air pollution. In the end, the rise in numbers of

²⁹ On waste management see Buenrosto and Bocco 2003.

personal means of transportation had a negative effect on the environment due to the growing levels of automobile emissions (Connolly 1999, 69–78).

Cartagena initially photographed the suburban developments outside Monterrey in 2006. Returning three years later to document the site, he discovered a range of growing environmental issues. To his surprise, natural water sources were waning, and the remaining water in streams and rivers had become stagnant and unhealthy. He has commented: "In the northeastern Mexican state of Nuevo León, some rivers and streams have dried out or [are] in the process of drying after Monterrey's metropolitan area erupted its urban growth and its demand for water. These dried up streams and rivers are one of many unintended consequences of wrongly implemented economical strategies" (Cartagena et al. 2011, 60).³⁰ The resulting photos make up the series called *Lost Rivers* depicting the effects of the array of harmful ecological practices created by the construction of these housing projects.

The photograph *Suburbia Mexicana: Lost Rivers*, #45 (figure 5) captures the current state of the environment. In the foreground, debris and construction waste litter the riverbanks a short distance from the row of tract houses. Tossed onto the banks are a few hollow concrete blocks (the type used in building the suburban houses located across the river) and discarded plastic pots (typically holding plants used in the yards). The river water level is so low that riverbed rocks are clearly visible. Cartagena's characteristic employment of color enhances the contrast of the putrid green growth floating in strings on the dark water alongside the reddish-orange organic materials of the dried landscape along the man-made riverbanks. By presenting the viewer with this memorable and charged view, the photographer seems to call for a resolution to this unfortunate ecological development.

³⁰ While Monterrey has been pulling on water resources for the city and growing industry, the development of suburban sprawl seems to have increased water usage dramatically.



Figure 5. *Suburbia Mexicana: Lost Rivers*, #45, 2006–2009, archival pigment print. Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

Beyond the ecological problems of rivers, Cartagena's works show that most of these Monterrey-area housing projects have little or no landscaping, few existing trees, and insufficient numbers of green spaces (such as parks or recreational areas).³¹ "These large housing units include less equipment, infrastructure services, open spaces and green areas, since developers are limited to providing only the minimum elements indispensable to comply with established regulations" (Esquivel Hernández, Maya Pérez, and Cervantes Borja 2005). Consequently, the subdivisions lack the benefits of local nature as well as places for residents (including children and teenagers) to relax and socialize.³²

At the time, a comprehensive plan for a sustainable environment had not yet been put into action for government-funded housing in Mexico.³³ By creating such strong and thought-provoking socioenvironmental photographic statements, Cartagena strongly diverges from the *New Topographics* artists. In the *Lost Rivers* photographs,

³¹ During this period, a green area was not considered a basic necessity for residents: see Pedraza Meza 2010. The environmental benefits of green spaces include plants that filter pollutants from the air, provide shade, lower temperatures in urban areas, and reduce soil erosion from waterways.

³² In fact, some of these suburban houses are almost completely surrounded by concrete; as a result, the soil retains less rainwater (Connolly 1999, 63).

³³ Many areas lack access to essential services including good water systems and garbage collection (Herzog 2001, 17). On the manner in which the lack of services affects the residents, see Boils Morales (2008).

he documents the impact of the housing projects on the local environment and draws attention to the current ecological state (Uddin 2010).

Suburbia Mexicana: Portraits of Suburbia

Portraits of Suburbia, the final series in the *Suburbia Mexicana* project, focuses on people who have been living in these low-income government-subsidized tract homes. As noted by Cartagena: "In 2009, as part of this last series, I returned to the housing developments and photographed the people of Juarez where—as a result of urbanization—the population has tripled since 2002. Photographing this city has allowed me to encounter the humanity of these serial structures" (Cartagena 2010). After taking a long hard look at the residents and their predicament, Cartagena ultimately chose to emphasize the uniqueness of each person or family living in these standardized suburban homes in his photographs.

A large part of Cartagena's concern about the suburban developments relates to government involvement.³⁴ As noted earlier, the Mexican government subsidized the construction of hundreds of thousands of low-income, mass-produced tract houses and encouraged workers to invest in their future by acquiring them.³⁵ Not wanting to miss out on this opportunity, many workers purchased one of these new houses, only later to become aware of the ensuing problems with location or construction.³⁶

One of the numerous factors that greatly affected these new homeowners was the size of the homes. In one housing project, Residencial San Miguel, located in Escobedo (in the Monterrey metropolitan area), workers were able to purchase homes for \$15,000 (US) through a combination of savings and loans from government-backed lender, Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores (INFONAVIT) (Herzog 2015, 147).³⁷ These houses—equipped with

³⁴ On housing policies, see Zanetta 2004.

³⁵ Following the government model, contracting companies eventually built and initiated loans for more homes. Since their involvement in 1985, the World Bank has lent more than 250 billion dollars for housing loans in Mexico (Morrison 2014, 35). See also Zearley 1993 and Boils 2004. Construction hit a high point in 2005, when around 550,000 homes were built (see Janoschka and Arreortua 2017).

³⁶ See Tames 2004. Residential overcrowding signals a troubling housing shortage in Mexico estimated to be 8.9 million in 2011, see Morrison 2014 (72) and Maes et al. 2011. On the housing deficit in Latin America, see Balchin and Stewart 2001.

³⁷ INFONAVIT was created in 1972 for private sector workers as a way to improve financing of housing in Mexico. All salaried employees in the formal sector are members of INFONAVIT and five percent of each worker's salary went directly to this fund; thus, most workers would want to take advantage of this type of loan in order to get a benefit from their required contribution (see Morrison 2014, 31-32, and OECD Urban Policy Reviews: Mexico 2015). INFONAVIT eventually became the top mortgage lender in Mexico. Fondo de la Vivienda del Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado (FOVISSITE) was

electricity, water, and a sewage system—were an improvement over informal or self-built housing.³⁸ The usable area in these housing units is small, often with two main rooms and less than 400 square-feet total. Personal space is limited, given that each building often is occupied by as many as four to six people, and the houses are aligned so closely that each yard is minimal (Cartagena et al. 2011, 7).³⁹

Another difficulty was the location of the homes in the periphery (due to the lack of affordable land in central urban areas) (García Peralta and Hofer 2006). Pezzoli (2000, 16) has indicated (in regard to a similar type of construction in the region surrounding Mexico City): “Lacking viable alternatives, millions of Mexico City’s inhabitants now live in low-income settlements occupying land that is unsuitable for urban development. Such settlements occupy the barren, desiccated lake bed of Texcoco; hills that are unstable from mining; sites next to railway lines or factories that emit toxic waste; or . . . zones designated for ecological conservation.” Similarly, the selected locations in Monterrey are often less than acceptable sites for homes; for instance, the San Miguel project was built directly adjacent to a foul-smelling slaughterhouse (Althaus 2011).

Other issues affecting the residents relate to the specific community addressed. In some cases, the owners indicated recurring problems with poor construction (including large cracks in walls and sinking foundations) and the negligence of governmental agencies or developers in responding to requests for repairs. For other workers, transportation to work in the city center (which cost as much as the mortgage and took up valuable time) hindered their ability to continue living in their own homes. Difficulty in paying back the loans created additional financial issues for many owners since, often, their income was already stretched to the limit (García Peralta and Hofer 2006, 135; Eulich and Villagran 2013; and Bouillon 2012).⁴⁰ Consequently, large numbers of these low-income homes have been abandoned or repossessed by INFONAVIT.⁴¹

created for federal workers. As noted by Morrison (2014, 40), “the incentives created by INFONAVIT do drive an unsustainable, low-quality housing production system;” however, more recently, INFONAVIT is moving to employ new policies and incentives.

³⁸ Often referred to as “social housing” in Latin American, this type of housing includes illegal or self-built (informal) homes as well as low-cost owner-occupied (formal) housing developments. See Balchin and Stewart 2001 (333–334).

³⁹ See also Janoschka and Arreortua 2017.

⁴⁰ On recent developments related to housing difficulties and the attempt to make changes (e.g., through mobilization of the residents), see Reyes 2022.

⁴¹ The fact that INFONAVIT grew to become the largest lender may have limited the growth of privately subsidized housing (Morrison 2014, 40). INFONAVIT has acknowledged housing problems, especially vacancy, and has taken steps to make improvements for more recent housing projects that will help with future worker purchases—especially through better planning. For existing homes, they propose, among other aspects, to enhance the general environment and make houses that better meet residents’ needs (Monkkonen 2014, 10–12).

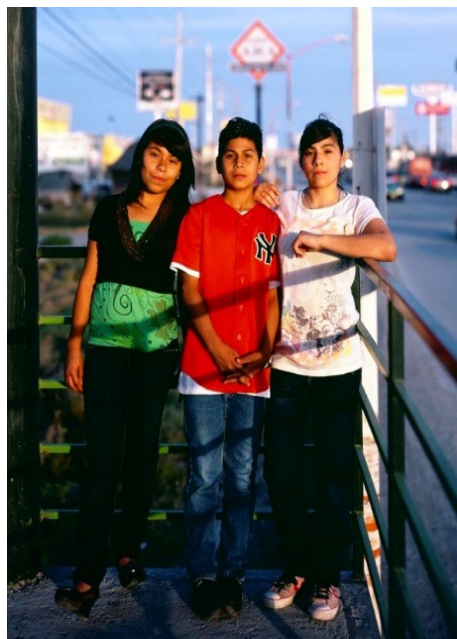


Figure 6. *Suburbia Mexicana: Portraits of Suburbia #8*, 2006–2009, archival pigment print.
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

Although Cartagena may question the lack of government foresight in creating these low-income housing developments, he is not blind to the value of life in the new suburbs. Even though it has been suggested by scholars who criticize the growth of suburbs that this serial type of housing could only create homogenous or lifeless inhabitants, photos in this part of Cartagena's project seem to suggest that these residents may transcend their current living situation.⁴²

A number of these images seem to show the resilience of the new generation. Despite the conditions, in portraits the young people seem proud and aware, rather than "churned out on an assembly line." (Montiel Klint 2011, 13). In fact, they appear quite strong and able in comportment and demeanor. For example, we see three

On this subject, see also Arvizu-Piña and Burgos 2017. While the average vacancy rate internationally was around 10%, Mexico had a vacancy rate of over 14% in 2010—although much of the vacancy was in central cities in Mexico (which, as noted earlier, may be due at least in part to the vast housing developments in the periphery) (Monkkonen 2014, 10–12). On reasons for vacancy (including violence and insecurity), see Herzog 2015 (149–150). Monkkonen has compared abandoned or vacant homes in the United States and Mexico. He notes that, in the US, the vacant homes are due to a "lack of government involvement and regulation" (7). In contrast, the problem of vacant housing in Mexico is due to government involvement. In addition to vacancy as one of the consequences of remote locations, González-Ochoa 2022 adds increased segregation and exclusion of the lower classes.

⁴² On the suburbs and conformity, see, for example, the historical statements in Archer 2010. On youth in the suburbs, see Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2000 (115–122).

young people (figure 6) who respond with a certain amount of attitude to the photographer taking their portrait. In contrast to a row of block houses (figure 7) that are differentiated only by a slight addition of color on the roof trim, we are confronted by the face of a distinct and unflappable young woman in red-lensed, white-framed sunglasses and red lipstick who seems to stand up to the camera with courage and strength. Cartagena appears to have connected with these residents and, thus, was able to capture the unanticipated spirit of the inhabitants of these remote suburban homes.



Figure 7. *Suburbia Mexicana: Portraits of Suburbia #9*, 2006–2009, Juárez, archival pigment print.
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

While these affordable housing developments often had “substandard” amenities (few or no green spaces, services, restaurants, stores, or schools), a number of images in *Portraits of Suburbia* capture the modifications made by owners either to personalize their homes or create new income opportunities.⁴³ Since these neighborhoods were lacking retail outlets for basic goods and services, residents found innovative ways of integrating shops and stands, either by operating a business from the front of their home or dedicating the whole space to a commercial enterprise (see, for example, figure 8) (Tames 2004; Monkkonen 2011, 415). Responding to need but also opportunity, commercial spaces or storefronts have been placed in high traffic areas

⁴³ Cartagena’s series includes additional photos (that were not discussed in this essay) showing other transformations made by residents to their yards and houses.

offering easy access to pedestrians.⁴⁴ These makeshift shops and food establishments not only provide a much-needed alternative source of income but also support and benefit the community.



Figure 8. *Suburbia Mexicana: Portraits of Suburbia #43*, 2006–2009, archival pigment print.
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

In this final series of the *Suburbia Mexicana* project, Cartagena photographed the workers and their families who did not abandon the tract homes in the periphery. Within the given limitations, the people have found a way not only to make their situation work but also to turn their house into a home or even a commercial venture. This ability to adapt to a situation shows the positive character of the occupants. The people of these suburbs revealed to the camera a side of themselves that shows not only their disposition but also their resourcefulness.

The *Carpoolers* Project

While the earlier project, *Suburbia Mexicana*, focuses on man's presence via landscape alteration and eventual habitation, the *Carpoolers* 2011–2012 project by Cartagena sheds light on one of the adjustments made by worker-owners to allow them to continue living in the fragmented landscape. Most of the jobs for these suburban homeowners exist within the central city and, as noted, adequate public

⁴⁴ On home-based enterprises in informal settlements and housing projects in Mexico, see Tames 2004 (42–46).

transportation is unavailable. Cartagena has stated that the *Carpoolers* series is “a visual representation of how these people deal with the problem of transportation in an overdeveloped city” (qtd. in Sinigaglia 2012). Since many workers lack vehicles, they are forced to find an alternative means of commuting to work.



Figure 9. *Carpoolers*, #5, 2011–2012, archival pigment print, 20 × 12.3".
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

Carpoolers features aerial photos of day laborers or construction workers riding in the back of pickup trucks and flatbeds from their home in the distant suburbs to the workplace. Each photo was taken from a pedestrian bridge that stretches over a highway crossing Monterrey. Many of the same vehicles appear over and over, sometimes with the same group or crew of workers and other times with a change in passengers. The carpoolers are male workers (in a range of ages) reading, talking, resting, or sleeping (see, for example, figure 9). Their comportment resembles, in some ways, scenes of bus and subway commuters of urban photography, except these commuters are exposed to the elements. In a few photos, the anonymous passengers are huddled under blankets or curled up to stay warm on inclement mornings. On a more temperate day, the images capture someone lying on his back, just staring up at the sky daydreaming or glaring at us crossly perhaps for invading his privacy (Bouet and Tousignant 2016).

The back of a truck is generally considered an open and public space, yet during the commute, it becomes a personal space where passengers spend their time alone or with other workers, neighbors, or even strangers. Each photograph repeats the aerial view of the truck bed. Even so, the photos do not appear monotonous; that is, the

use of a consistent overhead perspective allows the viewer to focus on the personal traits revealed through the commuters' intimate interactions or lack of communication. In rainy weather, we see a tarp tied over the bed with workers barely visible underneath, or a forlorn man in the back alone finding some relief in the warmth of a blanket while other workers ride dry and comfortable in the cab.

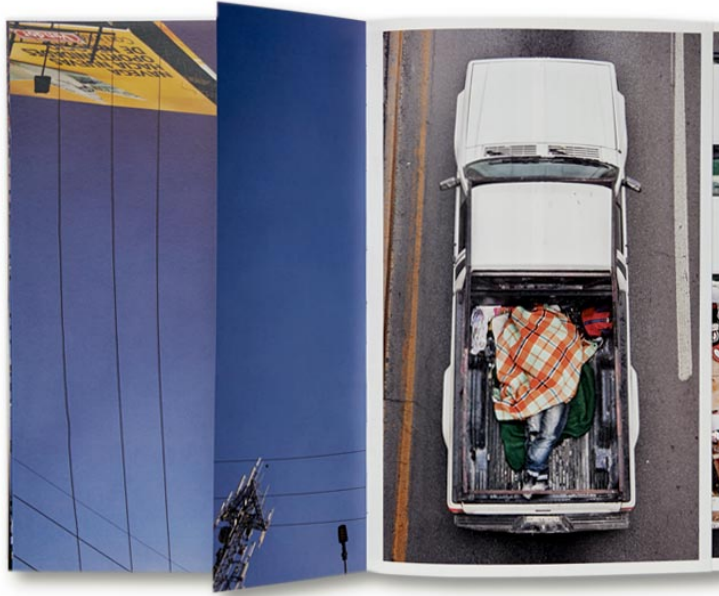


Figure 10. *Carpoolers*, #5, 2011–2012, archival pigment print, 20 × 12.3".
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena

In these digital photos, the individuality of the artist is apparent in the specific arrangement of his book, *Carpoolers* (2014). Since Cartagena self-published this volume of photos, he was able to create an unusual and playful format (90). The book arrives carefully wrapped in brown parcel paper and affixed with a sticker that reads "please carpool." Interspersed between the photos of the truck beds are images from the point of view of the carpoolers themselves: motion-blurred images, details of roadway signs, power lines, viaducts, the sky above from a low vantage point, and even a copy of the tabloid that the workers are seen reading.⁴⁵ A number of pages are cropped so the reader is able to flip the vertically-aligned smaller page to change the truck on the road or view several pages at once (figure 10).

⁴⁵ In order to get an idea of the viewpoint of the carpoolers, Cartagena rode in the bed of a truck and photographed passing views (see Bouet and Tousignant 2016, 38).

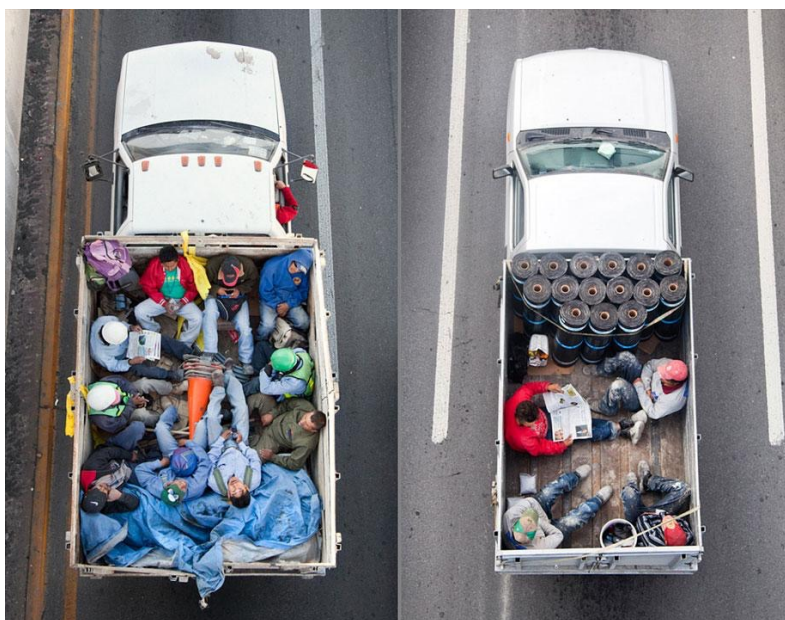


Figure 11. *Carpoolers*, #3, 2011–2012, archival pigment print, 20 × 12.3".
Courtesy Alejandro Cartagena.

Cartagena's unique personality shows up in the repetition of forms as well as in the arrangement of his compositions. He admits that there is a bit of humor in the images of these commuters that lightens the heaviness of social issues.⁴⁶ Whether the subject includes figures crammed together in the small truck bed (figure 11) or bundled up like the objects they are delivering, these images show a human response, a way of coping and depending on one another.

From Issues of Suburbia to Carpooling

Alejandro Cartagena recorded the socioeconomic and environmental impact of suburban growth on blue-collar workers in his two photographic projects. In the earlier project, *Suburbia Mexicana*, he depicted the initial construction and later habitation of mass-produced suburban houses created for low-income workers and funded by the Mexican government. In presenting multiple aspects—the setting, the homes under construction, and the effect on the environment and residents—his investigation uncovers both positive and negative issues of development and its consequences as related to the needs of worker-owners.

⁴⁶ A presentation by Alejandro Cartagena took place on Tuesday, March 17, 2015, at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, where he discussed the previous project, *Suburbia Mexicana*, as well as the humor in this project, *Carpoolers*.

In returning to the site after the homeowners have settled in, he portrays the people of the suburbs and their home transformations in a manner that challenges previous conceptions about these suburban dwellers. As he notes: "My images are trying to present the more complex situation that's never told in the commercial and ideological stories of homeownership. The idea of buying a home is that it will bring social mobility, safety, love, a family, the whole Hollywood, Disneyland version. But there exist loopholes in this story, particularly in how homeownership had been photographed, always from the outside" (qtd. in Murray 2020). In contrast to previous depictions of homeownership, Cartagena is sensitive to the workers' needs or desires and sympathetic to their situation, thus, he attempts to depict a narrative that is multifarious.

While this project may have been inspired by the *New Topographics* work, Cartagena introduces stylistic qualities and social, environmental, and economic concerns that were not addressed by Adams or Deal. His attention to form is emphasized by his introduction of color and low-angle compositions which effectively accentuate the distinction between the rows of nearly identical man-made houses and the natural mountainous landscape. Moreover, the strength of the formal aspects of his work calls attention to the content—the lived landscape and images of inhabitants and workers, environmental concerns often due to rapid construction, deteriorating natural resources, and lack of services for residents—and uniquely defines his work. The theme of land altered by man emphasizes his relationship with the *New Topographics* artists, yet numerous aspects distance his photos from their work.

Cartagena approached the issues with a more personal understanding of his subjects than the *New Topographics* photographers. As mentioned, he captured the destruction caused by planning and building oversight including ecological, construction, and location issues; however, he has also revealed an affinity for the people who reside in these homes in his portrayal of the strength of their character and the transformations that allow residents to make these nearly identical houses into individualized homes. In creating works that specifically show his concerns, this photographic project strongly diverges from the work of the *New Topographics* artists.

In the later project, *Carpoolers*, Cartagena documents an everyday feature—the daily commute to work. The circumstances may be specific to Mexico, but the compromises may seem familiar worldwide. Since many people desire to be homeowners, more workers may have to commute a distance from their home to their job. In cases where there is limited transportation, workers find ways to make the situation work. Sharing a ride is a common solution. Nevertheless, these depictions of workers carpooling in the back of the truck bed present a view into the individuality of the

interactions (or lack of interactions) and offer insight into a unique form of ride-sharing in Mexico.

Cartagena combines a trained and observant eye with an awareness of common needs, obligations, and socioeconomic and environmental concerns. Through his attention to detail that is apparent in the carefully composed images, in the emphasis on the strength and correlation of color, and in his deliberate choice of subjects, he is able to capture the essence of issues surrounding these multifaceted housing developments in his photographs. Specifically, in *Suburbia Mexicana*, his photographs seem to place the viewer in the scene and highlight depth through the contrast of the light and shadow at sunset, calling attention to the isolation of the housing units from the city. In *Carpoolers*, his consistent use of aerial views gives us an intimate view of workers creating personal spaces in publicly-visible commuter vehicles. In these two projects, Cartagena reveals the manner in which suburban growth has affected the lives of these workers in Mexico for better or worse.

Acknowledgment

We would like to give special thanks to the artist, Alejandro Cartagena, as well as the anonymous peer reviewers for *MARLAS*.

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<https://www.unca.edu/programs/art-history/art-history-faculty-staff/>.

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