July 27

Our first full day here in Nicolas Romero! We began the day at Llano Grande, by the Inglesia in the playground. Having already explored last year’s work in the fall 2013 seminar, I was overwhelmed to see the renovations made to the park! A full playground with swings, slides and climbing walls constructed from tires had been installed through community effort. We met with Lola and Tomas’ son Rivaldo (though Tomas himself was absent). Auréal (spelling unsure) also joined us in addition to Sarah, an architect from last year, and of course Enrique. The meeting was surprisingly positive, given last year’s somewhat abrupt welcome to Llano. I have to say, the warm welcome and the beauty of the park additions really brightened my feelings toward the direction of Llano, especially when it was unclear if Enrique had followed through from last year. Lola elaborated that the park was a great source of pride and community bond in its development and completion. The importance of this must be highlighted as inter-community conflict had been one of the greater issues at play in Llano. However, without Tomas present it is difficult to discern the bond between community leadership. I’m excited to find out in the following days.

With respect to our role and the needs of the community, I felt like we touched on a conflict of priorities. On one hand, there are the concerns of community amenities; namely, the much needed repairs on the church, the creation of a football field, and the aeration of the park grounds. On the other, there are the outstanding systemic and infrastructural issues, like consistent wastewater runoff into the creek, potentially to the detriment of Llano’s youth, who often play down there. Solid waste, particularly plastics, continue to be burned in trash fires, possibly leading to higher rates of cancer. Potable water continues to be scarce in the dry season. Llano Grande, it turns out (according to Enedina, from El Tráfico, in a rather confusing discussion from later this same day), is not on ejido lands, but formerly were, before being evicted by the university and developers. Instead, there situation is even more precarious, where they occupy federal territory, open to eviction at any time (from my understanding of Ari’s translation of Lola). Llano Grande may be considering ways of occupying their territory as community ejido, though that has yet to be discussed with anyone from Llano. The process of doing so strikes me as bewilderingly complicated.

In El Tráfico, we were greeted in Enedina’s famed courtyard. We sat in a circle drinking agua fresca discussing the changes in the community, and projects for these two weeks. Enedina showed us the work of last year--the beautiful and elaborate handbags weaved from discarded plastic bags. Awais suggested his bead project that could also recycle plastic. Last year El Tráfico had used tires for retaining walls and decoration (best witnessed, in fact, in Llano’s new park), but with the Nicolas Romero ejido’s new commissioner, even such small adjustments to the built environment are in jeopardy; he is apparently much more strict, possibly more demanding financially for his approval. Someone suggested the possibility of corruption. Enedina mentioned
inviting this commissioner to future meetings. We have yet to really hear her suggestions for our two weeks, but I cannot help but feel disappointed that this commissioner business scales back our scope.

We then hopped back onto the bus to visit an escuela nearby that was being renovated. There we learned that residents were tapping water illegally into the next ejido, adding to some conflict. The land tenure problems here seem to have everyone, including our community liaisons, thoroughly confused. Having signed up to research this topic, I'm happy but nervous to provide some light on this complex issue.

My final impressions for the day were on how rights to land and property deeply affect our built environment, how we take amenities for granted as natural extensions of those rights, and how we may come to accept poor living conditions in face of systemic adversities blocking those rights. Part of me is thrilled at the possibilities for action with the environment in Llano, and hesitant of the restrictions facing El Tráfico. Seeing ad hoc, creative ideas executed in material, electricity and water in the planning of these two communities inspires me of what is possible in collaboration. Another part of me hates this sentiment, that I am romanticizing poverty and underplaying the hardships here. I'm also trying to hold lightly my ideas and ambitions as a planner and designer. After my studio earlier this summer I feel very confident in prototyping, praxis, experimentation, but I know this is not the exact focus of this time here in Mexico, but rather collaboration, participation and emergence. These foci are not mutually exclusive, and I'm excited to see how they play together in the following days.

Signing off,

Tom/Tomas
Photo 1: Vivek overlooks the parque in Llano Grande
Image 2: The new parque in Llano, with the dilapidated church in the background.
Image 3: Park detail of recycled tires as play element
Image 4: Park detail of recycled tires as planter for rosemary.
Image 5: Tree branch as electrical infrastructure.
Image 6: Outside Enedina’s in El Trafico.
Image 7: Adobe bricks in El Trafico housing.
Image 8: The brut concrete and barking dogs ubiquitous to El Trafico.
July 28

Today we began our partnership with our Universidad Albert Einstein students, watershed managers and others involved in the work of El Tráfico/Llano Grande. We took the UAE bus way up into the mountains toward the campus, at one point surpassing 10 000 feet, according to Patricia’s estimate. The second day had me feeling more contemplative, ready to listen and welcome new knowledge and people. I also felt lower in energy, possibly from the altitude and the weather (it’s hailing as I write this).

Having the seminars at UAE was most fitting, I felt. Right away the campus really took me aback. The brick work, the feel and spaciousness, the harmony with the environment—the school really seemed like a perfect place for scholarship and camaraderie. There was something intimate. The three presentations I had already seen in different iterations: Señor Alvaro’s I had witnessed back at UT for a conference on peace and conflict. Patricia’s I had seen in last semester’s participatory methods class, and Enrique’s I had seen in pieces in the seminar from fall 2013. The review felt much needed, especially because it allowed me to get comfortable understanding the concepts, material and locales in Spanish. Everyone came with a really positive attitude, but the sense of confusion regarding work and direction was palpable. I felt good discussing in my broken Spanish, but I could sense myself getting frustrated in my inability to express myself in the moment, particularly when ideas began to flow. That said, everyone with whom I spoke was patient and supportive.

Right then, after the presentations we suddenly had to decide with which community we wanted to work. I felt this decision daunting, as many of us did. How were we to choose? Many of us seemed to be awaiting details on the work to be done in each community, something that had not yet fully emerged. In the previous year’s seminar I chose to work with Llano, having felt its circumstances more in tune with my own work. However, seeing the popularity of Llano, and the complications of ejido tenure, I decided that El Tráfico would be better. I cannot explain it, but I felt inside of me it was a better fit. Something about its environment and the impression of those we met seemed more aligned with how I have been feeling in my time in Mexico. I suppose you can call it a hunch. I’ve been trying to trust my intuition lately.

The El Tráfico team consisted of me, Gibran, Awais, Chloe, Auréal, Karina, Cuauhtemoc, Cynthia from the watershed commission, Fabiola and Alberto. We all discussed why we chose El Tráfico and our backgrounds. Fabiola, Cynthia and Karina were silent, talking among themselves. Alberto expressed his interest in feminist issues which really got me excited! Such an important issue that had yet to be
discussed, and coming from another man. Chloe and I each mentioned the built environment and design, Chloe focusing more on social elements and I on expressions of land tenure in city development. After only a few minutes we broke for lunch.

The wait for the bus felt awkward. I really wanted to talk to our new friends and practitioners, but the language made me shy, and I think they too were feeling the same. I felt awkward in that moment, something I hope to get over as I build confidence. Back at Pueblo Bonito, we continued to speak in our respective camps as we waited for lunch. I continued to feel like we were not using our time together wisely, bonding and discussing our upcoming work. Once we finished, we broke for time to plan our day tomorrow. El Tráfico went up to the top of the hotel. I attempted to present my ideas in Spanish, but my vocabulary was simply too limited. I suggested doing a walk around with Enedina where she might discuss her own project ideas, giving us a chance to experience the community. We eventually decided, upon Patricia’s suggestion, to see if the women’s group may be willing, as Enedina had led a similar walk last year that had involved a strong bent toward her thoughts on the community, as opposed to a more inclusive experience. Patricia had some very strong suggestions that we all appreciated, especially when we felt like we were pulling on too few leads. We decided to participate in the community lunch tomorrow, taking the time to meet with those coming, and also meet with the women’s group. Tomorrow, we felt, will be critical in building a relationship and getting comfortable in the community. It’s difficult to feel comfortable in these tasks, especially when we as practitioners are still new to one another. It did not help that three of the Mexican practitioners left right after lunch. Auréal kept the energy up and presented our ideas for tomorrow, but I didn’t feel established, ready. I suppose that’s part of the journey. I’m looking forward to talking to people tomorrow! And being part of life in El Tráfico. The time here is so short. I’m definitely beginning to feel overwhelmed between making a lasting impact, getting to be part of the community here, and still checking my expectations of myself and others. Instead, I’m trying to remember more than anything it is about the process. My ambitions aren’t quite where they were yesterday, but I’m still feeling high from the excitement of everything going on.

Signing off,

Tomas

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July 29

From the moment we arrived at Llano by bus, something from today felt momentous. This was the first day we were able to execute some of the rough plans we devised with our Mexican comrades. We dropped the Llano team off by the church, and while we
awaited others, we walked the streets a bit, introducing ourselves. It felt peaceful. I got to chat with our new team mate, Eva, a software programmer who studies at UAE. I felt good speaking with her in Spanglish, getting me excited for our upcoming introductions at Enedina’s. We got back on to the bus once Enrique had arrived.

Enedina’s was chaotic. We didn’t properly introduce ourselves, but rather stood awaiting the moment to commence. We began by sitting in lawn chairs in a circle, but quickly that fell apart, with everyone going up to different clusters of the women’s group. The feeling was overwhelming, and I felt lost in the shuffle. I sided to Awais and Gibran, in need of translation, and sat in on the first discussion around Awais’ jewelry project. Immediately the samples passed through the room with an electric air. It was clear that the project was a hit with the group. From there Patricia called me over to discuss with Jésus Marquez, a municipal official who was well informed on the ejido/municipality tension. Sadly, his updates on the subject were, though enlightening, ultimately discouraging. He mentioned the new ejido president was clashing heavily with not only Enedina and those within her circle, but the municipality of Nicolas Romero too. It’s halted all work on the barrancas, bioswales, and other environmental projects in El Tráfico due to restrictions related to new costs. Jésus seemed extremely disappointed, especially with respect to the tension. I could really relate to his frustration! Just his manner of expression, and the story he told, really resonated with me. We all know the trials of bureaucracy, but for Jésus, a man who dedicated his life to his community, the adversary presented by the new president was felt in his core. I really appreciated his honesty and openness, and also his patience with my Spanish once Patricia had left.

In that time Awais, with the help of Gibran and nearly everyone else in the salon, put together a comprehensive materials list and plan for his workshop tomorrow. The energy was high. I was encouraged by the plans made, but also feeling awkward because I did not really play a role in realizing this new direction. I was happy to listen and chat and learn, but I somehow didn’t feel like I was part of the action in that moment.

I inquired with Rafael, a professor at Universidad Fidel Velasquez, about the walk. Between him and our ever so social partner, Alberto, we collectively managed to raise spirits for the walkabout around Llano. I very much wanted Jésus to join us, and asked if he could please come. He checked in with Enedina as the group was leaving, and happily he came with us! We were also thankful that Alejandra, rather than Enedina, led the walk, as we had been warned yesterday Señora Enedina can be a bit leading in her presentations. Auréal later said he was pleased Enedina did not lead the walk because we got to see as part of El Tráfico that is normally not in such tours. As we walked, Eva and I stopped to grab water and a snack, chatting about our lives along the way. We met up with Auréal, who has also fallen a bit behind to chat with some locals. We enthusiastically encouraged them to join the workshop Awais had
coordinated at Enedina's! With Auréal in the lead we sparked a number of discussions on the street, encouraging strangers to join tomorrow. Auréal kept the vibe exciting and positive. We joined the rest of the group to overhear Alejandra's lead on the issues, namely the issues of waste water, plumbing, trash and difficulties in implementing ideas, such as a park that may cover up the ad hoc sewage system witnessed further down. Alejandra explained that residents are not obligated to create plumbing, and that most plumbing runs into the rivers anyway, hence the contamination. The conversations among the walk seemed informal and honest, with residents chiming in as we went along. Despite the clear infrastructural issues, I still appreciated getting to see El Tráfico a bit, hearing from its residents, and experiencing it as a living place. I found the neighborhood beautiful, vibrant, and brimming with opportunity--not in the sense of what needs repaired or upgraded, but rather the entrepreneurial, the communal, the collaborative spirit that seemed to permeate the neighborhood.

We got back to Enedina's and immediately loaded onto the bus for our lunch at Fidel Valesquez. There, I struck up a passionate conversation with one of our Mexican comrades, Alberto, in French! We discussed the importance of feminism in Mexico and within El Tráfico, a topic he hinted at the other day. We discussed politics, ecology, vegetarianism, it was one of those moments where I really felt like we clicked. He had such great spirits! I'm really excited to work with him in the following days.

At Universidad Valesquez we walked around the hacienda, a moment of tranquility and contemplation. I took the time to think about colonialism in Mexico, the history of political complications (Valesquez having founded the PRI, according to Ari), and more questions about material environments and political action and collaboration. I thought it funny how we build in isolation when making physical impacts on our encirclements are collaborative actions that affect those around us. More questions on property, ejido and communal living.

We finished the day recapping our stories of the day with Patricia guiding the discussion. I felt extremely nervous trying to express myself, even with Gibran as my translator. I nevertheless talked about my time with Jésus. Everyone spoke so eloquently! Though people had differing opinions on how closely the action plans were followed, everyone agreed the day had been positive. We broke into groups to again plan for our next day. Our team agreed that Awais' workshop would be the foundation of the day's events. However, our discussion on how the workshop would act as a platform for conversations on community and environment came to a stand still. Perla had many powerful suggestions for future workshops, and Auréal had many ideas for long term projects. One that excited me was the building of humedals, or bioswales, to capture water runoff and pollution. Auréal discussed such a project at length, which fascinated me after having worked with such technology at Berkeley earlier this summer. Perla talked about how her home had many examples of such alternative
ecological technologies, and we all insisted that we must visit! She also discussed the project of using plastic bottles with plaster as a more permeable pavement surface. I loved hearing all these ideas, but didn’t know how they may be translated into projects or workshops. We agreed to discuss the importance of compost in Enedina’s kitchen while we worked on our jewelry. We also decided a real introduction was needed. Auréal again volunteered to speak, but I felt awkward continuing to put him on the spot. I continue to feel shy in my language abilities, but perhaps after tomorrow’s introductions I’ll be more in the swing of the exciting dialogues happening around me.

Signing off,

Tomas
Image 9: Discussion about today’s preceedings right before we got into the ecotecnia at Enedina’s.

Image 10: Alberto (left), Aureal (middle) and Cuauhtemoc (right) install posters outside Enedina’s for the next day’s workshop.
Image 11: Aureal explores El Trafico’s largest barranca.
Image 12: Gibran and Aureal invite ladies to the upcoming workshop after exploring the barranca.
Image 13: Aureal discusses with a neighbor about wastewater hookups into one of the barrancas.
Image 14: Ad hoc wastewater connections in El Trafico.
Image 15: Tires as garden fence in El Trafico.
Image 16: Crack in the potable water system in one of the streets of El Trafico.
Image 17: PET reused as planters on the school fence in Llano Grande
July 30

Workshop day at Enedina’s. High tension stuff: how will Awais translate his instructions? What about introductions? Will anyone come? Will we have the insightful discussions we had anticipated? None of the concerns hindered what was a great time, one that brought the women’s group, Enedina’s visitors, and our team closer together.

After dropping off the Llano team, the bus headed to El Tráfico, with Eva and I chatting along the way. Turns out she is a true mogul! She showed me photos of her family, her various esthetics enterprises, her marathons. We talked life ambitions, the importance of feeling part of something. It put me in a great mind space for the morning.
Upon arriving at Enedina’s Cuauhtemoc, Auréal, Karina and a small group of women greeted us. The salon struck me as sparse, bringing in the dread of any event organizer: will they come? But of course, nothing to worry. Folks arrived leisurely, ready to participate in the morning’s workshop. I coaxed Gibran into making a few announcements about when we would start. We arranged the tables, placed seating around, lit and blew out candles a few times, and awkwardly shuffled until we felt ready to make our introductions. In Spanish I managed to introduce myself, saying only a few words about my interest in sustainability and community. Everyone said "mucho gusto" once I finished, making me feel welcome. Awais and Gibran soon got right into it. They were brilliant! Excellent pacing, ease, patience and intimacy in the way they presented the steps. Enedina and others would crowd around, especially nearer to the end, eager to see the process and the work, as well as present their own. Eva, Chloe and I sat across the table, working on our own earrings. I would compare progress, style, color with the fellow ladies as we created together. The chance to make something physical from the recycled material together felt empowering, intimate. I still had the feeling that this project has its complications, namely that only a small amount of the material used was recycled (namely the plastic bags that were melted into beads), and that most of the material had to be bought. In the case of the wiring, the material brought by the ladies was too rigid, and we had to use Awais’. Not a bad thing, but still problematic when purchasing more expensive wire may undermine some folks ability to participate, or create their own works outside the session. Nevertheless, the workshop was a huge success. Everyone seemed high on the energy from working together, creating new, unique pieces. I chatted with Jésus and another attendee, Juana, briefly as the workshop wound down. Jésus was the only man there who was not part of the the practitioner team. He sat back watching, but seemed genuinely touched by the workshop. He enjoyed his time just being part of it as an observer. I was happy he came. Juana also was excited, comparing her works with others. Alvin and I had a brief chat with her, where she had borne witness to the violence in El Tráfico. She spoke of being robbed at gunpoint. It made me reflect on the fear that women face in such a community, something I hadn’t once considered til then. El Tráfico struck me as being so safe! But in that discussion I realized that I really knew so little of the day to day life in the community, especially for a woman.

Not long after we packed up and headed out. We got to speak to Enedina briefly about the Llano-El Tráfico rendezvous, and Saturday seemed like the best (as far as I understood through mixed translation and filling in blanks). Tomorrow Llano folks are to call us to coordinate while we’re both in the field. A few of us volunteered to stay for this exchange (myself included). On the bus ride Alberto continued our discussions from the other day, with Eva bridging the blanks in our French-Spanish. Food, politics, art. He agreed we wanted to stop at Professor Perla’s. We picked up the Llano team, and as we made our way to Fidel Valesquez we saw Perla flag us down by the side of the road! We swung back, eager to see some of the ecological technologies employed in her home. We got the full tour! Retention walls with tires,
humedals/bioswales for gray water, green walls for home cooling—all affordable, easily implemented ecological projects that really inspired me for our time here! As we were guided through her home, Alberto insisted we visit his, saying it was just down the road. At first I politely declined, citing my and the group's hunger. But Chloe was really interested, and her excitement resonated with me. She asked Patricia if it would be OK, and not only did she agree, she asked to join! So there we were, the whole gang walking down the road to Alberto's. The visit, of course, was more than worth the walk. Alberto and his family treated us to a tour of their adobe brick compound. Really, I have no words. The place was gorgeous, built typically with local, sustainable materials. Truly a hacienda. I felt my calling: to one day build with my own hands something so beautiful. A communal home made by the hands of its dwellers using real sustainable principles. I hugged Alberto as we left.

At lunch we ate a delicious local vegetable, huanzantle (spelling likely wrong) in a fantastic mole sauce. One of the best meals so far. I felt distant, listening to the news on the TV behind us. So strange, being in Mexico working with these communities as Israel shells Gaza. My feelings are too nebulous for this journal. I felt quiet.

After lunch we again shared our reflections of the day, then broke into our groups for action planning. We decided to return to Enedina's with another jewelry making workshop, again with plastic bags but this time for bracelets and necklaces. We all agreed the workshop had been a hit, forging our relationship. However, there was some dispute about how to use our time; the workshop tomorrow ought not take the same length, so that we may focus on addressing larger community needs. There was dispute on how to start that dialogue. Folks, specifically Rafael, seemed keen on composting. Perla and I were hesitant. Perla mentioned that composting conversations had not been successful, saying that the visitors at Enedina's hadn't warmed to the idea in the past. She said that folks saw it more as a chore than an opportunity. I agreed. I loved Auréal's ideas for the humandal in the barrancas, but others thought that was too large and too specific a project to propose right from the get go. What about a discussion on the assets and needs of the community, asked Awais. In the end, the conversation stalled and we ran out of time. Mapping exercises, post it exercises, they all seemed possible. We felt good about the workshop tomorrow and the energy going into it. Ultimately it became a question of how to move with that energy into larger questions and ideas. Remains to be seen.

Signing off,

Tomas
Image 19: Posters outside Enedina’s advertising the ecotecnia.
Image 20: Chloe prepares the candles for melting the plastic bags as part of the ecotecnia.
Image 21: attendees hard at work on the creation of their recycled-material earrings.
Image 22: Gibran and Awais conduct the ecotecnia (center).
Image 23: Some of the final products of the workshop.
Image 24: Perla explores the humedal she installed in her home for greywater recycling.
Image 25: Perla explains her green wall.
Image 26: composting at Alberto’s compound.
Image 27: The view from Alberto’s home.
Image 28: Watching the Israel/Gaza conflict on TV in the Velasquez cafeteria.
Today presented me with some heavy internal conflict about the direction of our time here, relating to others in a milieu where we’re invited guests, and the importance of creating space for dialogue. From our entrance, the energy and arrangement was similar—circular seating around a table, as few women and children ready to go, as handful of them part of Enedina’s cooking team. Auréal and I attempted to resolve lingering questions for the setup of the important discussions we were intending to have. I sat down between Norma, a professor from Universidad Fidel Valesquez, and Atzity (spelling here a blunt guess), a woman from El Tráfico whom I didn’t recognize. I tried asking her and some of the other women seated if they felt the map was legible, and if they could identify their homes, as well as Enedina’s. With Auréal’s help we identified Enedina’s, as well as the local primary school. I was skeptical of using the map because Patricia had mentioned that it can pose more confusion for those who are not very map-literate. The map itself was terribly pixelated, adding to even greater
worry. In the end, the women seemed responsive to the map, identifying streets despite the pixelation. We put it up on the back of the black metal door, by the entrance, with the graphing paper on which all we invited to write their problems and aspirations for the community. A simple setup, but one that struck me as legible from the broken Spanish conversations I had with those I asked about the map.

The workshop unfolded similarly to yesterday’s. Awais provided direction on the bead bracelet production with Gibran translating. This time I made a point of sitting away from other practitioners, particularly the UT team, to break the divide that I felt in previous occasions. The downside, of course, was being distant from translation. Gibran translated only Awais’ instructions, and provided Awais with translations of those speaking directly to them. Alvin and Chloe were across the table, unheard over the din. I managed to have some conversation with Norma and Atzity, but fragmented, confusing, and overall humorous, as communicating in broken languages can often be. My constant grabbing for my Spanish English dictionary became a running joke. They tried to keep me abreast of the conversations happening around, which I really appreciated, but I mostly had to get the just afterward from Auréal. Composting was discussed, as well as food, the importance of food (jokes about the edibility of snails were made, after someone brought up their use in composting), and it felt that a real space had been created for this kind of conversation, as Patricia later put it. However, I felt Rafael really had to lead the discussions, and that it petered out quickly. The larger systemic problems we wanted to address were only scratched.

At this time I admittedly felt very ill from the fumes of molten plastic. It’s not common for me to suffer such illness, but the fumes in Enedina’s space were affecting me. Unlike yesterday, the frequency at which the plastic bags were melted was much greater. I wasn’t the only one to step out. As much as I appreciated the space created by the workshop, I really had to question the detrimental health effects taking place. Unlike the weaving, this workshop required more material, especially the kind that needed to be purchased, and the melting of plastic. The blue masks being handed out did nothing. When working with plastic, more sophisticated protection is needed. I felt that this workshop, though a fantastic way for us to be closer with those there, must be reconsidered. If folks were to continue working this way, their health would be at risk from toxicity.

We ended the workshop with Rafael insisting on the posting to the wall set up, stating it as homework. Though his insistence was appreciated, I did not feel comfortable with the tone used. Nevertheless, I felt good that the discussion was unfolding, and that the bigger questions were beginning to be part of that discussion. Only five posts had been put up, but we left with the hope that the lunch time attendees for Enedina’s kitchen would enrich the board.
Meanwhile, Auréal was coordinating with Enedina and Llano over telephone for Saturday's skill exchange. Any time Saturday seemed to work, but Auréal concluded that eleven thirty am was best, with even some new El Tráfico participants excited to come along. We left feeling elated on the workshop, the exchange, and maybe the fumes.

Back at Universidad Fidel Valesquez, we had another group discussion, though this one much more fraught on direction and timing for Saturday’s exchange. Confusion abound. I had difficulty following, again due to translation. Apparently the time decided, eleven thirty, did not work for Llano due to a conflicting demand. Ten am had already been advertised around the community. We came to a compromise where part of the workshop would begin at ten. Patricia made the excellent point that the skill exchange was not the only goal, but that we may be overlooking the relational objective of creating that kinship between the two communities. I couldn’t agree more, but did not know how to express it. We broke into a two group plenary, as was custom. El Tráfico continued to debate how to execute a discussion about the adversities and ideas for the community. We felt that the workshop has been successful, but the translation to a discussion was difficult. We agreed new issues seemed to be on peoples minds: namely, crime and delinquency. Alberto suggested how parks and public space could be a place to creatively address these issues. I really liked this idea, finding it bridged many of our interests. Ina, another professor, thought perhaps a park was not really addressing issues directly, that such a space opens potential, and not necessarily ways of dealing with them. I agreed with both sides. In the end, we decided to continue where we left off. There remains confusion as to whether we will continue the discussion over another workshop. We all agreed we, as practitioners, needed to be spread through the group, instead of clustered as we had on the previous days. With this too I agreed, though I felt worried about my continued difficulty in translation. I must admit, the push into immersion has really helped my Spanish, if at least my listening skills in the language!

I left feeling really confused and lost. Not demotivated or worried, just unsure. I called Aditi, one of the closest people I have in my life and with whom I traveled through Mexico before starting the practicum, on the phone before returning to the bus. She reminded me that such dialogues, the practice of space and the power of process were all such important and beautiful acts; that my moment of being lost was critical, that such a practice is one of being lost, but collectively so. I felt a wave of relief. This practicum, like many things in life, are not designed with technicalities and underlines, but exploring what can be done together through thoughtful conversation. We got back onto the bus, and I drifted into a peaceful semi sleep as we drove through the now familiar streets of Nicolas Romero.

Signing off,
Tomas

Image 30: the national food program banner outside Enedina’s
Image 31: The ecotecnias continue
Image 32: The posters we installed outside Enedina’s, washed out
Image 33: The PVEM insignia outside Enedina’s—Partido Verde Ecologista de Mexico, aligned with the PRI
August 1

Friday, the first day of August, the midpoint of our time here in the Valle de México. Again we repeated Awais' workshop, again with the intention of really digging into the heart of El Tráfico, inciting profound discussions on agency, ecology, recycling, community problems, and visions of a brighter future for the area. I sat next to Eva, beside children who had joined the workshop but were from out of town: Juan-Carlos, Andrea, and Arturo, plus our new best friend, Marie (part of the women's group in El Tráfico). This time Eva was really on point in facilitating the conversation, especially engaging the kids (who made up a large portion of this relatively low turnout). Marie, Chloe and I shared a lot of laughs working on our respective pieces. I didn't feel as ill as the other day, possibly because fewer people were smelting plastic bags. Eva asked some great questions, including "¿que es basura?", and why melting plastic may be hazardous, leading into a discussion on the ozone, the ecosystem, and our thoughts about waste. The fewer people, and Eva's careful questions, opened the dialogue to laughter, reflection, and profundity, especially with the kids, who seemed really keen on talking! I listened on with Chloe's occasional translation, but was able to follow quite well without! Marie and I really threw ourselves into our work; her earrings were the most spectacular I'd seen in the three workshops! Though smaller in attendance, it was the most pleasant of the workshops for me, as I could follow the conversations more easily, as well as relate to those nearby in a way that had been challenging with the larger groups. We discussed the boards with the post-it notes briefly, reiterating the common threads: delinquency, waste, green space, water. We finished up without any real plan for the next week, but did confirm our return for the afternoon women's group meeting.

We headed back to Fidel Valesquez for lunch and debrief. I could really feel my energy sink. I felt tension over the ecotecnia, the next week's direction, as well as exhaustion. The mood was prevalent in the bus and at lunch. By the time we meant to debrief, the group had broken up, wandered off in a daze, confused and unsure where to head next. Those leaving for D.F. didn't know where to go. Llano folks neither. El Tráfico was to go back to the bus to prepare for the afternoon's women's meeting. Slowly we collectively crawled back to the bus, unsure what the plan was. Everyone seemed ready to collapse. The was no direction on the next week. The UT team managed to re-group by the bus, in the shade of some recently planted rows of trees. The Mexican comrades stood in a circle nearby, talking somberly with Enrique. I felt tense and divided. There continued to be debates about time and attendance for tomorrow's skill exchange workshop at Llano. I struggled to follow the conversation. Eventually those headed to D.F. broke away, those off to the women's meeting loaded the bus, and we were off.
The women’s group was a real change of pace, for the better. There was a circle setup at Enedina’s, and the vibe felt colloquial and free. We sat at the far end of the circle, which was a little disheartening, as such division can be a source of discomfort. It did not strike me as awkward, as though Enedina picked up the discussion right where it must have been interrupted by our arrival. Chloe helped me with translation. Heavy topics were discussed, with Enedina doing most of the talking and Patricia facilitating. At first we discussed the success of last year’s ecotecnia, how there are scarcely any plastic bags around El Tráfico, and that the weaving had been very popular with those outside the women’s group. Indeed, others described how the plastics weaving had taken off from informal work as they visited friends and family. A true network of ecological weavers had taken off in El Tráfico.

The conversation shifted to darker subjects: Enedina described an incident where her papeleteria had been broken into, the assailant holding her with a weapon, all in the early afternoon. Others told stories of violence and delinquency. Enedina talked about the death of a young man, younger than I, stabbed to death, left in the streets only a few blocks away. The mother came to Enedina, unable to bury her son for financial reasons. The stories were heavy, but the energy continued to remain strong, the women refusing to succumb to morbidity and depression. Humor was still there, hanging in the air, small jokes made, though I didn’t know their nature as it all happened so fast. Enedina explained that she’ll be discussing such issues of violence and delinquency with the state’s governor, though I could not follow the details.

The conversation shifted to trash, with descriptions of how only two main streets provide service, and that others without that access are more inclined to throw out their basura into the barrancas. Ideas of public shaming and reporting were put out into the air. The conversation slowly turned to the question of a lack of sports field and clean green space. There’s the site of el tanque, behind the church. Alberto returned to his suggestion of starting something there. Enedina discussed the question of that land being donated to the town, that it was not property of the church. The discussion moved into questions of jurisdiction: to whom belongs the barrancas? And who shall manage the streets? To whom do we ask for land to bury the dead? This particular subject was triggering: women in the circle began to cry. I thought of death, and how death may be such a greater part of reality here in Mexico, where violence is more common, youth more desperate. There the conversation of violence continued, this time with a real air of darkness and pain. Enedina continued telling stories of women battering, the cost to be healed in such incidents. Then, silence. The story of the young man murdered. After a disturbing pause, Alberto suddenly, abruptly returned to the topic of the park. Logistical questions were debated for tomorrow, and the circle broke up. The exchange was on: we’d be there with the bus to pick everyone up around 9:30am (meaning 10). Alberto, Cuauhtemoc, Auréal and I talked to Enedina about the park, me in French to Alberto. The conversation was animated. Alberto suggested a presentation we could arrange for when the municipal
officials come to Enedina’s on Monday to talk about the land, delinquency, and other issues. I suddenly appreciated just how powerful Enedina really was, and that her power comes from hard choices and negotiation. Such work strikes fear in me, honestly. I thought of the issues between Lola and Tomas back at Llano, and their failure to properly play the game of politics. I don’t blame them. It’s a cut throat enterprise, especially here. Exchanges, stories of bribery, corruption, competing authority came to mind. That Enedina can keep abreast really took me aback in that discussion.

Alberto really insisted we could secure that park for El Tráfico. I’d be a great amenity, one where young people can play and perhaps learn about the needed ecological systems to heal El Tráfico. I liked the idea, and agreed that the UT team could put together a presentation of a more design-technical sort for leverage come Monday. I pitched it to the rest of the group, who had been sitting off a bit to the side of where we were talking. Chloe and Alvin were lukewarm. I told Alberto we’d have to discuss it. Enedina reiterated (through Alberto’s translation) how it would be a powerful asset, such a presentation. Everyone said their goodbyes, and we were back on the bus.

High tension upon discussing the presentation. Everyone was still clearly agitated. Alvin and Awais expressed their hesitations about the idea. I insisted we needed some unfiltered honesty on whether we ought to put this together. Alvin, Chloe and Awais all agreed it was a random, and perhaps outright unethical, proposal. Awais was utterly against it, saying it was antithetical to PAR. Alvin thought the whole idea seemed to have materialized out of nowhere. I thought the project was a good idea, that we weren’t planning a park for them so much as helping leverage the pushing of the land to the community, before it may be sold (from my understanding of Alberto). I agreed, that it was Enedina’s and Alberto’s project, making it random and not properly discussed with the group with whom we had been working. I also agreed with Awais, that it would not be the community’s work, that we’d be acting as technical experts, a role that does not embrace PAR. Patricia entered the conversation, saying it was a great opportunity if we choose to accept it, and that it could be a fantastic asset in securing the land. With that, the group was silent. Back at the hotel, we tacitly agreed to undertake the project. However, with the entirety of the group away for the weekend, I offered to undertake the work, with Alvin occasionally offering to take on some of it from D.F. and Monday morning. The tension lingered. I asked if we should drop the idea. No one seemed sure. Because of my insistence I felt like it had become my project and my responsibility, making me very nervous, that I had abandoned the principles with which we had set out, that I had abandoned my fellow teammates.

Signing off,

Tomas
August 2

Exchange day! A handful of us, including members of both the Llano and El Tráfico, the UT and UAE teams, got on the bus. Others went with Sarah the architect in her Ford Cruz. Upon arriving at Enedina’s, one of her workers informed us that the women’s group was not back. She had no idea about the day’s exchange. We decided to go take photos of the land behind the church as we awaited their arrival. We walked to the park, feeling relatively light and excited despite the heaviness of yesterday. Upon arriving to the church, there was much difficulty in discerning what constituted the land at hand. Chloe, Vivek and I took time photographing any and all of the grounds that may be part of the park proposal. We agreed that it was likely the marshland with a dirt football field at its back. After sufficient documentation, I bought some tunas and mangoes to celebrate. Erasmo had suddenly appeared with the bus, urging us to get in. Turns out Enrique had already picked up the ladies and taken them to Llano! What on earth? We were all confused by this sudden change, though relieved that things were in motion.

Off we were to Llano. Upon arriving we headed to the primary school where the workshop was taking place. Awais was leading inside a classroom with many participants eagerly fabricating jewelry, employing the same techniques as in El Tráfico. Things seemed to be going well. I came in and out, as the room was less ventilated than Enedina’s semi enclosed space. Awais insisted that those who were not participating must leave. I stepped out to chat with some kids who were hanging out with a dog, Choco. Israel and I played with them and the doggie for a few minutes, both of us seemingly unsure of what to do with ourselves. After some time Enrique arrived with Enedina and company for the weaving workshop. Then began the awkward transition. I, Enrique and Vivek set up the adjoining classroom in a circle after some debate about whether to install indoors or outside in the shade. Enedina and others were showcasing their work outside, and Enrique facilitated the move into the new classroom. Slowly participants filled in once they’d finished their work next door. Enedina, Paula and a few others from El Tráfico began their instructions. Energy in the room was extremely high, with the El Tráfico group enjoying their chance to lead and showcase, and the Llano folks eager to learn this new skill. Before long the workshop was well under way. Chloe and I sat next to our friend Marie from yesterday, asking her to show us what we’d missed. We awkwardly began cutting out our own strips of plastic, laughing along. Enedina began a compelling discussion on how the women’s group had started, how successful the bags had been, how she was happy to teach anyone ready to learn, including her enemies (a potential jab at Lola, as we later theorized, though Lola was conspicuously absent). Later I learned that the discussion on the women’s group had been suggested by the ever tactful Sarah the architect. At the end we all introduced ourselves, with cheers and applause. The exchange really
couldn't have been more successful, with Enedina putting down her contact info, eager to return to Llano in the future. Our goal of forging that connection had been met, nay, surpassed!

Back outside, folks were checking out the park in front of the church. We all took time to chat informally and admire the park. I brought up how we may print the poster to Enrique, though wary of his ability to come through after a series of mishaps on his end--the confusion from earlier that morning still fresh. He seemed confused and ultimately unable to help in such a printing operation. Auréal, however, said he'd be able to plot whatever we came up with the morning of. I showed Enedina some photos we had taken, and she confirmed its location as well as the meeting Monday. So it was on. Alvin, Chloe and and I talked about how we'd come up with the poster. Let's keep it simple, we agreed. A football field was needed somewhere, according to Enedina's suggestion. What about the marshland? We should leave it intact, it cleans the water, as we learned at Perla's the other day. I told Auréal we'd have it ready for him Sunday night, before midnight. I told Alvin and Chloe I'd try to get something to them by 2pm Sunday. (It's 3.45pm as I write this on a tablet, with no access to a computer). Alvin and Chloe didn't know when they'd return from D.F. Everything was in the air, but it felt like we had confirmed a simple poster to express the importance of the park there. Alvin, Awais, Katie and Chloe went off toward a collectivo. Vivek, Patricia and I walked toward Sarah's car. We said our goodbyes. The four of us took the afternoon off to swim at the hotel, have lunch, and talk sustainability, the communities, philosophy; generally, we got to know each other better over good conversation. The rest of the day Vivek and I explored nearby Tlazala, had dinner in town, and chatted a bit by the pool before turning in early.

Signing off,

Tomas
Image 34: Awais’ workshop in Llano Grande’s elementary school
Image 35: Enedina’s crew arrives. Chloe points the way to the second room
Image 36: Enedina’s crew lead the weaving workshop
Image 37: The weaving workshop underway
Image 38: Enedina leaves her contact info on the whiteboard
Ven a las reuniones para mejorar tu comunidad.

En la primaria 10am-12pm
Te necesitamos

Ven a cambiar tu vida!
Taller de Manualidades con Bolsas de Plástico.

¡Ven y aprende a elaborar bonitas bolsas de plástico!

Solo trae:
- Tijeras
- Bolsas de Plástico
- Ganchos para tejer
- Muchas ganas de aprender

¿Dónde?
Primaria Miguel Ángel de Quevedo
A las 10:00 am
¡No Faltes!

Image 40: Poster announcing the day’s exchange
August 4

Monday began with the very official meeting between Enedina and the municipal officials. I felt very nervous about the poster Vivek and I had assembled the night before. We put together something relatively simple on Sunday for the El Tanque park proposal behind the church. We rendered a soccer field complete with children playing, benches and an insert of the marsh we had labeled as a potential humedal. I was very worried about the print quality, the quality of the work, its reception, and my team mates responses. We arrived at Enedina’s, and again no one was home. The panic reared again, that we messed up the location or something to that effect. Not to worry, we were told by one of the neighborhood boys with whom Chloe spoke. The officials arrived, and we waited awkwardly by the carport entrance whereas they waited above, by the papeleteria. Enedina arrived, the gates were opened, and the meeting began.
At this time Patricia, Vivek and others had gone to visit El Tanque while we waited. By
the start of the meeting they had yet to return. We helped install tables, but without
purpose: Enedina and the officials had begun at a smaller table. Right away the
meeting struck me as the exclusive sort. The students shook hands with the officials,
but as soon as we had, we shied away to our setup closer to the carport doors. Marie
Flores (I believe) showed us some of her work from the workshops, and we were
ecstatic! Beautiful stuff. We took photos, of course. Eventually Patricia and the others
returned, and Patricia lost no time in approaching the officials' table. We awkwardly
sat behind her. I forget who made the joke that we were her amassed army of
students. None of us could hear the conversation. I passed Auréal the rolled poster. He
inspected it, only to notice the mistake of labeling the marsh in El Tanque as an
humedal. In the end, it was simply a highly toxic, contaminated marsh, not a
biofiltration system in any way. I should have foreseen such an error! I noticed that
there was a fair amount of discarded plastic in the water when we had taken photos.
Needless to say I felt deeply embarrassed! How foolish! I ought to have better
designated the waters as being capable of adaptation as an humedal. Vivek and Auréal
took the poster to quickly reword it. I was blushing in shame.

Eventually the meeting ended, the very official seeming officials left, and we gathered
around Patricia for a debrief. We learned that the visitors were not from Reforma
Agraria, but rather intermediaries from the state. They could do nothing in advancing
our land or community concerns. We had attended the wrong meeting! The park was
shut down utterly, with no possibility for official designation. The mere proposal of
rallying a group into park discussions was now futile, too nebulous to be brought
forth. I left the poster with Enedina to give her a visual for any future headway that
may be made once we've gone. No one seemed impressed, though no one seemed
disappointed either. I was at ease with the ultimately indifferent reception, after
working myself up over it the last few days.

We loaded onto the bus, utterly confused. I spoke with Vivek and Patricia a bit more
on the ride. El Tanque had been the water hold when El Tráfico was still mostly
agrarian, roughly fifteen years ago (from their account, the account of a member who
had joined them on the walk prior to the meeting that morning). The site was
desperately contaminated. Enedina had organized a thorough cleanup of the site last
year, right after the 2013 UT team had left. Machines were brought in. And nary a
week later, the site was again a complete dumping ground. The park idea for this week
had to be scraped utterly.

At Fidel Valesquez we began our usual debrief session. With several of our UAE
comrades missing, talking about the process and group dynamics didn't seem right.
We kept silent. Upon prompting from Patricia, we began talking instead of our week's
action plan. The death of our park direction left a void. We decided to select which of
the three main issues identified we'd most like to work on: we almost unanimously
agreed basura (as opposed to delinquency and wastewater). So at least we had a theme! Though violence and delinquency were the more pressing issue, I felt. We simply didn't feel capable of taking on such as heavy issue in the three days that remained, especially when we had been focusing on waste in our ecotecniyas. We moved indoors once it began to rain. There we decided how to execute a three step program for the following three days. Tomorrow would be dedicated to a discussion of the role of waste in the community. The next would be on deepening ideas on how that role may be charged for the better. The last would be the creation of an action plan to resolve the abundance of trash. We felt a mapping exercise for tomorrow would work best. I suggested the topic of how families may not have access to waste disposal, recalling the comments from last Friday's women's meeting about how only two main roads had access to waste disposal. The idea, I suggested, was to find a way to discuss the role waste played in the lives of the community that was non judgmental: it is not to be about condemning those with unethical practices, but instead learning why waste is being discarded in the barrancas, El Tanque and elsewhere, and how that may change. Mapping waste in the neighborhood--where it is, where it goes, where it accumulates and where it is disposed--would be a powerful way of seeing how waste exists in El Tráfico. We devised an action plan for the next morning: an introduction to the topic and the activity, larger scale mapping of waste in El Tráfico, small scale, block size breakout groups for waste in a more fine scale, and a homework assignment/concluding remarks period at the end. Attendees are to be asked to photograph waste in the area for the next day's activities. I was happy with this plan, because it seemed possible, as well as giving us a chance to deal with the outside urban environment after a week of interiority with the ecotecniyas at Enedina's. Our roles and the execution of the maps had not been fully discussed, but all too soon Enrique came to say it was time to go.

The day had gone well despite my neuroses about the poster. We figured out a plan of action we all felt was exciting and realizable. None of us seemed particularly upset about the park business from earlier. I think now we just want to leave El Tráfico with a better sense of their frustrations of waste, and how they may collectively address them. I feel like this is a noble goal. Stay tuned.

Signing off,

Tomas
Plan para un Parque en El Tráfico

Humedal
Para la filtración de aguas grises

Campo de fútbol
Lugar para los niños para jugar y aprender

Antes
Después

Image 1: Poster of El Tanque for Enedina
August 5

Our workshop for basura mapping was a low: no turnout beyond those working in the kitchen and a mother and daughter, though it was unclear whether they were there for the workshop. I spoke to them a little bit as they played with dolls, but no translators were around, and they seemed happy off to themselves, in their own world. Upon meeting Enedina, Auréal explained to me that the ejidal commissioner has come by earlier in the morning (or later yesterday, I don’t remember), that she had showed him the park poster and even left it with him. He liked it! Not only that, he agreed to support the park plan come the next assembly in November. Unbelievable! After all that doubt, the thing came through. I was really happy that we could be of help.

The joy of the poster success still didn’t relieve the disappointment of the turnout. The group decided to venture out with some of the updated Google map prints (Ina and I added the location of Enedina’s, El Tanque, and the main road, Ave. Mateos, to them
while awaiting attendees). Everyone but Patricia and me headed out. We decided to sit back and await the possibility of the commissioner’s return for a deeper conversation. Enrique and Eva arrived, and Enrique and Patricia coordinated for Friday’s event. I drew up a rough map of El Tanque on the quadratic paper for the possibility of a new/joint workshop on a participatory park plan. Alas, upon Enedina’s return she informed us that there would be no park planning until its approval at November’s assembly. So we would stick to attempts at the basura mapping. Alberto, Cuauhtemoc and others returned from their walk. They had gone to check out El Tanque, and invited folks to tomorrow’s renewed workshop attempt. Alberto, Patricia and I invited Enedina to Friday’s event, though she said she didn’t know and couldn’t commit today. She didn’t seem very interested. Alberto was a little more insistent, elaborating on the event’s importance. I personally felt really invested in having her, that the community’s voice needed to be heard among these elites. I suppose we will ask again tomorrow, once she has a better idea of her obligations.

On the bus Chloe and I spoke animatedly about the ejido land system. I had spent some time the other day reading up on the subject. After the land reforms of 1991-2, ejido land, that had been previously communally owned and managed agrarian land, began a process of privatization, where the federal government lost power to controlling them, instead shifting authority to ejido governments and assemblies formed by the families that inherited the lands from its agrarian past. Land could be subdivided, sold, and re sanctioned according to these government bodies. This created a semi private/semi public jurisdiction where municipalities and ejido governments overlapped in authorities, with neither obligated to perform a range of granted urban services. Enedina wishes to leave the ejido system and become fully part of Nicolas Romero as municipality, where infrastructural services will be necessary. There is some confusion as to whether such a move will skyrocket property taxes, as they are low under the ejido (to the detriment to services, it would seem). So what we have is a bizarre political gray zone between formality and informality unlike anything I’ve ever seen. This system is also fascinating as it comes out of a socialist ideology of communality in land tenure, but has been slowly perverted and divided (or perhaps it always was perverted, or it was always impossible as an ambition, depending on where you stand in your politics).

After lunch at our usual haunt of Universidad Fidel Valesquez we visited two sustainable farm projects that were really inspiring: Rafael, one gardener who’d been at it for roughly a decade, and a school teacher whose name I forget, showed us first a school that had made farming an integral part of the curriculum. We then visited Rafael’s home, complete with a more elaborate operation. In both cases I was deeply impressed by the dedication to community, economic viability and sustainability. That their plants were curative for the community, but also lucrative in value and designed with an educational framework helped me conceive of how sustainability was something accessible, viable and vital, a very different impression we often get in the
United States (and Canada), where sustainability is often framed as a compromise, a commitment, a worsening of the consumer driven way of life. I wished farming, medicinal plants and ethnobotany had been a more integral part of the Sustainable Design program, if not my education from primary onwards. We finished the day at Rafael’s sampling some of the products he had produced from his farm, overlooking some of the various sustainable techniques he employed. Powerful stuff happening out here in the poorest parts of the valley.

We returned to find Pueblo Bonito sin power. A candlelit dinner was in order. Awais and Gibran told spooky stories over quesadillas. The atmosphere was just right in bringing us together--no computers, tablets or cellphones, just each other. We turned in early. I read by candle for a brief moment before drifting off.

Signing off,

Tomas

Image 3: Designated maps for basura mapping
Image 4: Announcement of the next day’s workshop outside Enedina’s
Image 5: Getting the tour of the school with the ecological curriculum
Image 7: Getting the tour of the school with the ecological curriculum
August 6

Attempt number two at the basura workshop. Again, no turnout. Enedina and others had to attend a funeral. We, the UT team, the Mexican students and the professors (Perla, Ina and Norma), assembled in a circle once we realized what was happening. I knew we had to break from the interiority of Enedina’s space, as we were failing to reach out to El Tráfico, relying on Enedina’s ability to assemble a conversation. I suggested we have a stall outside, something like a “fiesta de calle”, to attract folks to discuss waste systems in El Tráfico. I asked specifically for the consent of the group before going forth with the planning of this event: the last thing I wanted was to rush into another idea to which the team didn’t agree. We decided, yes, an exposition of ecotecnias complete with tarp, maps for the basura flows, agua fresca and music. The team decided on who would be responsible for what, and broke to tell folks on the street about tomorrow. It was good to get out and talk to people, see a little more of the neighborhood by foot. We stopped a handful of folks, mostly women, who all seemed interested in tomorrow. A few said they thought the workshops were over, as we weren’t there Monday despite having intended to come. This may have explained our low turnout. After half an hour talking to folks on the street about tomorrow’s exposition we went back to the bus.

After lunch at Fidel Valesquez we headed to the municipal headquarters of Nicolas Romero to meet and discuss with planning officials. On the bus Patricia strongly suggested we reconsider tomorrow because of turnout, and instead focus our energies on creating more posters. I felt deeply uncomfortable with such a proposition. Though glad our first poster had been effective, continuing to design the park would only further rear us into the role of technical experts, creating products outside the public’s input, ideas and ambitions. Renderings are powerful tools, and I felt like it was an inappropriate one here, especially after the tension of the last. Not only that, I felt like canceling the event would have cheated the community out of a promise, cheated our team out of a promise. We had made the event plan and put the word out. Further disappointing those with whom we had spoken would hurt us and our relationship. After some deliberation on the bus we agreed to draw a few maps by hand to portray some ideas for the park in a simple, purely suggestive manner. These could provide a topic for conversation once the park project was ready to be publicized and authorized. Anything else, as Enedina had explained yesterday, would be premature.

We arrived to the municipality headquarters after the intense bus ride, with details still being decided as we walked over. The UT group really didn’t feel up to such rendering and poster suggestions, though the idea lingered in the air. Ultimately, we stuck to the original plan, with the addition of the hand drawn maps we would offer to Enedina. By then we were ready for our meeting. Most of us sat in the peanut gallery behind the triangular officials table. I passed my questions to Ariadna, as only those
seated at the officials table could ask. I asked two, both having to do with ejido issues. The first was how El Tráfico may leave the ejido to join the municipality exclusively. The other asked what the municipality's relationship was like with the ejido. The answers, from Gibran's translations, proved unsatisfying. The officials explained that the issue was complicated, that they were working on it, and that the ejido had exceptionally low property taxes despite its government asking for services. It sounded as if being part of the ejido was advantageous, which it may be for Llano, upon which most of the conversations seemed focused. The advantage, of course, would be legitimacy, in their case. It was an interesting perspective to get directly from the officials. However, I imagined that the ejido government was then asking for services from the municipality’s coffers without necessarily benefiting the community, seeing as the government of the ejido would only represent the interests of the families and communal owners who have the authority for decision making. Beyond that, it was interesting to see Enrique make a case for the plight of Llano, especially with respect to the brownfield, of which they had no idea. It was also interesting to hear that they needed to preserve green space according to federal urban programming, and that dumpsters were not considered a good project because it generated more trash on the whole. Otherwise, the meeting appeared to involve the usual politicking: complications, bureaucracy and process all obstruct realizations, but we, the elected, are doing our best. Fair enough. I appreciated the commitment to university partnerships and sustainability, though couldn't help but feel their tone as being somewhat callous. The circumstances of these two communities was indeed complicated, but I didn't feel as if I had greater insight into the process as before. They were working on it, things were in motion, but no light on Enedina's ambitions to secede from the ejido, or Llano's/Tomas' ambitions to form one.

We headed back to the bus, ready to finish our work for tomorrow: journals, event preparations (for tomorrow and Friday) and our maps for El Tráfico (the exact use they shall serve still in the air).

Signing off,

Tomas
Our last day on the communities! Despite the turnout so far, we’re ready for this one. We roll up our maps and load the bus--a small ride this day, with everyone behind at Pueblo Bonito. Our maps, though not seemingly professional, still had an attractiveness in their simplicity. We enjoyed making them into the night, and we all felt they demonstrated the possibilities for El Tanque in a non technical, inclusive manner. My own included a boardwalk network should the marsh be decontaminated.

We arrived at Enedina’s ready to set up. We brought out the tables, examples and maps of El Tráfico for basura mapping. Auréal arrived with a stereo, and Perla with her astounding examples of recycling! Some I hadn’t seen til then, including a Japanese room divider made of magazine covers. I swear, it looked like something that belonged in the MoMA. She also brought oranges for snacks as well as examples of recycling. At first only Enedina’s crew was present, but the group was large enough to
make it feel like a true fiesta de calle! We had a large display from the ecotecnias, a mapping station, music and food. Eventually others, some just walking by, others we had invited yesterday on the street, came, helped fill out the map, chatted, and appreciated the wares on display. We really couldn’t have had a stronger turnout given the time and date. For the mapping, fewer folks seemed interested, though we did manage to transition some of the passersby into participating. Mostly sites we had already imagined were identified, namely the barrancas. Still, identifying those was helpful, and folks thought it was interesting to see. Gibran explained to me that plastics were a big issue, collection was not accessible, and that dogs were also a big source of waste, something I hadn’t considered yet. Just as the rain clouds gathered we finished up our event. With the first big droplets descending we managed to pack away our affairs. Inside Enedina’s we said our goodbyes. Enedina seemed so happy we had been there the last two weeks. Everyone did. It seemed a shame to leave after so short a time. We presented her with the maps of El Tanque and the basura mapping from today. She seemed genuinely thankful, recalling our work with the poster. I insisted it was just to give a few ideas, nothing too wild, and that when the time comes hopefully they may spark conversation. We continued to insist she come Friday, but she didn’t seem to know whether she would be there. I suppose it will be a surprise.

We gathered by the carport doors for several group photos. We were all smiling and laughing, happy to have spent the time together the last two weeks. I really do hope we can follow up in the fall, coordinate some online collaboration with our Mexican comrades so that they may take on the participatory mapping when the time comes. We were very happy to have had a proper goodbye, something that we would have missed if we had chosen to do renderings this morning. In the end, relationships take precedent, at least for me. Renderings can always be emailed.

We returned to Pueblo Bonito for lunch. Unfortunately, the flu has bitten me hard, and I needed to rest. I slept roughly an hour before coming down. We enjoyed lunch at a big table, everyone together. Soon after we broke into our community discussion groups for one final debrief. After waiting some time for all our members to arrive, we began. We talked about how we felt as if we didn’t necessarily accomplish much (to paraphrase a translation of Auréal), but rather provided the seeds for greater community change. I agreed with the sentiment. The were a lot of struggles, mainly with regard to getting participation within a confined space. I mentioned that I felt we needed to engage in public space, that being in public was in itself an important act. Rafael agreed, saying that we needed to find ways of building interest in a large community, that Enedina’s group was a strong but that a larger dialogue was needed. In all, we were happy to have worked together, gotten to know the Enedina groups and the community, and perhaps inspired a new way of thinking about waste.

We gathered in one big circle to share our final impressions, reflections and magical moments. I can’t recall everything folks said, but it was collectively agreed that we’d
had an incredible, profound time; that we had all had a chance to bond with our communities, despite hardships; that we were better practitioners because of it. We concluded with dinner, and though a fiesta was underway I had to retire quite early because of illness.

Signing off,

Tomas
Image 9: All set up and ready to go for our fiesta de calle
Image 9: Full setup
Image 10: The UT team on the last day
Image 11: Awais holds a puppy
Image 12: Awais and Chloe work on posters
August 8

The final workshop for our time here in Mexico. We met up at UAE in a large conference room. I didn’t end up planning the event, so the arrangement was a real surprise. Folks mingled for a bit, grabbing coffee and snacks before sitting down for Enrique’s presentation. His was very much similar to the one we had seen at the beginning of the field work, with the exception of the fabulous dancers who broke up each section! They performed a number of different Mexican dances with each one a different outfit. Having such entertainment was new to me, and I was very into it. I may consider such an idea in any future public speaking I do myself.

After Enrique’s presentation on the watershed’s history and issues, we broke into the action teams based on the themes our students had devised. I sat with Alvin, Chloe and Liz at the urbanization table. Unfortunately I was in and out for these table sessions as I was awaiting Cesar from the hostel with some forgotten items at UAE’s front gates. The urbanization team devised a system of integrating private farming operations into a collective entity. I really liked the idea, though when I dropped by I asked questions on how that would really affect land use issues/urbanization. It struck me as a way of creating a “nuevo nuevo ejido” system. I suppose the joke was a bit pessimistic. That said, I’m a big proponent of collective farming, especially in the way Rafael had shown us the other day. I thought it was a stellar idea, and that it could really work toward enabling the preservation of green space, as the state so intends. The tables presented their ideas, but I couldn’t quite follow beyond Perla’s presentations on humedals. The event ultimately seemed like a success: folks had created some solid action plans, professionals connected, but still, I was sad that Enedina, Tomas and Lola were absent, despite our teams’ insistence on their presence. Though they had all been invited, none came. I know I had made sure Enendina felt like her presence would have been important. Perhaps these larger issues, ones that involve the bourgeois actors, did not seem relevant to them and their community. Bridging that gap, making larger ecological issues and issues of poverty, community and marginalization intersect will be the only way that the cuenca can overcome its systemic problems. It struck me as odd that pollution problems were not attributed to industry and capital, like with the tanneries that dumped into the watershed (as Enrique explained upon pressing the day we arrived). My final thought on this whole enterprise is this: placing the weight of ecological living upon the poor may be noble enough, as they must live with ecological consequences first. But that neglecting problems of toxicity from industry pollution, automobile usage, and chemical runoff is even more disastrous, but often seen as the price of doing business. It’s unfair, and it is something that was not addressed in our time here. Scale has been a very complicated negotiation--moving between systems thinking and pragmatic solutions for today. I’m happy that the larger conversation was had in the end. I just
feel that the community needs to be there too, with the systems of poverty and displacement within the 3E sustainability framework: economic, environmental, and equitable.

Post Script

Where to begin? I am back in Austin trying to reconstruct my memories and experiences. Two things come to mind immediately: the distinction between professional and personal, and the distinction between observer and participant. Participatory Action Research has done much to complicate those distinctions, and these last weeks have dissolved them utterly. Boundaries play an elemental role in the creation of space, especially within personal relations: so much of our time here required the navigation of personal space and delineating roles. If nothing else, this has been a profound exploration of how those boundaries, roles and distinctions may be reconfigured to create something unique to circumstance. That kind of
reconfiguration is so necessary when working with intense, emotional and disadvantaged environments like Llano Grande and El Trafico, and I am grateful to have had the chance to explore that kind of direction, especially in a professional context. Such a shift needs lots of time, and I am sad we only had two weeks; with much more time this kind of endeavor could really prove to be a great revolution in the way urban planning may operate. But such constraints are real, and must be accepted as part of this new sort of practice. It was a challenge. Direction proved messy. Nothing may be easily delineated in such practice, and as such honesty—a kind of radical honesty to which we are often unaccustomed—must be the de facto level of communication.

In colonial history terms like development and aid have been co-opted from their more benevolent definitions to justify practices of exploitation where agency is marginalized beyond recognition. Dialogue and emergence may yet prove to be forms of bridging privilege and creating relationships based on mutuality and trust. At times, these two weeks felt like this really was possible. Sustaining that energy, that kind of relationship requires a patience I often worry we, as professionals, lack. Bureaucracy and results hold us accountable, but they can also sideline pressing needs for contemplation on the entire enterprise of making the world in which we all collectively live better. Did we create a material change within our partner communities? I, like Aureal, have my hesitations in saying yes. But was that the relational objective? Was a shift in consciousness, on our part, as well as the part of our global neighbors, our fellow practitioners, of equal importance? Of course, and I think we really did realize that objective.

In our two weeks together we, the practitioners, the communities and the professors, had a space to converse about what we really thought was important, honest, and true. That space almost never exists. Its forging alone is a testament to how new methods in planning, education and (the ever complicated term) development may enable a depth previously unfathomed. I still think calculated results and strategic execution are essential guidelines, but this time has made me appreciate how such expectations may be re-written to address marginalization, the kind of marginalization standardization inevitably razes. Will our partnership change El Trafico and Llano Grande for the better? Better and worse here become a bigger question of what better may be, to whom, to the interests at play. And these semantics may finally have a possibility to be debated.