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MEXICO CITY JOURNAL

Lush Walls Rise to Fight a Blanket of Pollution

By DAMIEN CAVE
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MEXICO CITY — “We must cultivate our garden,” Voltaire famously wrote at the end of “Candide,” but even he could not have imagined this: a towering arch of 50,000 plants rising over a traffic-clogged avenue in a metropolis once called “Mexsicko City” because of its pollution.

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Rodrigo Cruz for The New York Times
A vertical garden at the Restaurant Padrinos in Mexico City is part of a wider effort to improve the city's notoriously bad air.

The vertical garden aims to scrub away both the filth and the image. One of three eco-sculptures installed across the city by a nonprofit called [VerdMX](#), the arch is both art and oxygenator. It catches the eye. And it also helps clean the air.

“The main priority for vertical gardens is to transform the city,” said Fernando Ortiz Monasterio, 30, the architect who designed the sculptures. “It’s a way to intervene in the environment.”

Many cities have green reputations — Portland, Ore., even has its own vertical gardens. But in the developing world, where middle classes are growing along with consumption, waste and energy use, Mexico City is a brave new world. The laughingstock has become the leader as the air has gone from legendarily bad to much improved. Ozone levels and other pollution measures now place it on roughly the same level as the (also cleaner) air above Los Angeles.

“Both L.A. and Mexico City have improved but in Mexico City, the change has been a lot more,” said Luisa Molina, a research scientist with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has done extensive pollution comparisons. Mexico “is very advanced not just in terms of Latin America, but around the world. When I go to China, they all want to hear the story of Mexico.”

Partly, it is policy. Starting in the 1980s, Mexico’s government created mandates that reformulated gasoline,

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Rodrigo Cruz for The New York Times

The eco-sculptures were installed across Mexico City by a nonprofit called VerdMX.

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But regardless, among the young, hip and educated — those opening new boutiques for modern Mexican design, and partying at the [Vive Latino music festival](#) — there is a growing civic consciousness.

Part of this can be seen in the capital's vibrant art scene, where environmental concerns often overlap with creative expression. Indeed, a version of the about-to-burst potential that once characterized Paris or New York in, say, the 1920s, seems to have arrived in “new world” megacities like this one, but with a twist. The Machine Age of the early 20th century has given way, for some, to the Green Age of the early 21st.

There are young [architects here looking to tear up roads and revive ancient rivers](#). There are [young women teaching old women how to plant tomatoes](#) in the grass between high-rises; artists [turning ocean trash into gorgeous, consumer criticism](#); and even a crowd-sourced [multimedia campaign with visions for “Mexico of the Future”](#) — which includes submissions such as “a solar panel on every house” and “respect for flora and fauna.”

VerdMX's giant green sculptures — which are part of a broader vertical and roof garden movement — fit right in. In the normal day-to-day commute, however, the gardens show how far Mexico City still has to go.

The most stunning vertical garden so far hovers over Chapultepec Avenue at an intersection typically chocked with buses, cars and taxis. On a recent morning, drivers appeared to speed through the installation without noticing the plants, which looked downright crippled. Their leaves were as limp as a dead rose's petals. Only the lucky ones facing south, toward a quieter street, away from idling buses, seemed to be growing at a normal rate.

“The plants are distressed by all the traffic,” said Gabriela Rodríguez, director of VerdMX. Still, she said, they were chosen for their hardiness, and they were going to survive, at least for the year the sculpture is scheduled to remain.

The project's main challenge seems to have been cultural. Ms. Rodríguez, a graphic designer with ink-black hair, a deep voice and a taste for shades of pink, said finding the resources and getting the government permissions took years. She said Nissan, a corporate sponsor, needed to be convinced that it would get the credit it deserved. (The company introduced its Leaf [electric car](#) here last year.) And the government needed to be convinced that the garden would work as a living monument.

“Mexico is still a place with a very conservative culture,” said Mr. Ortiz, the architect.

closed or moved toxic factories, and banned most drivers from using their cars one day a week. More recently, Mexico City added a [popular free bicycle loan program](#) and expanded public transportation systems.

Environmentalists are far less impressed with double-decker highways still under construction. But even the most optimistic Mexicans have never expected government to create “the best of all possible worlds,” to quote the character Pangloss in “Candide,” so many here prefer to rave about citizen-driven, cooperative efforts like VerdMX.

Mexico City has become an incubator for these kinds of groups, which mix corporate financing with new ideas. Some say the activity stems from the tangible nature of the problem; bad pollution is felt in the scratchy throats of all.



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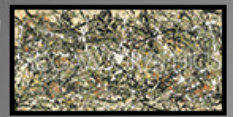
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“When I would tell people about this, they’d always say: ‘It’s impossible. You’re crazy.’ ”

That pretty much captured one strain of thought among those who pass the sculpture every day. “Sure, it looks nice but what good does it do?” said Rosendo Hernández, 58, a newspaper salesman at the intersection.

Others dismissed the garden as a waste of money. One man walking by said that while Mexicans love art, an upside-down U full of plants cannot compare with a Diego Rivera mural.

Maybe it does not need to, though. Mr. Hernández said many residents like the sculpture enough to take pictures of it, and Riberto Pineda, 17, who washes car windows at the stop light beside it, said he has grown to love the tall garden for two simple reasons: “It’s pretty,” he said. “And it’s great for shade.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 19, 2012

The Mexico City Journal article on April 10, about a towering vertical garden, one of three eco-sculptures installed across the city to be both art and oxygenator, misstated the role of carbon dioxide in urban pollution. Ground-level ozone forms from the interaction, in the presence of sunlight, of nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds; it does not form from carbon dioxide.

A version of this article appeared in print on April 10, 2012, on page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: Lush Walls Rise to Fight A Blanket Of Pollution.

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