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One of the prime movers behind the restoration of Mexico City's historic district, billionaire Carlos Slim Helú is also a major investor in the neighborhood.

Previous page: a view of the recently completed Upper Court of Justice Foreign Affairs Ministry buildings by Mexican architects Ricardo and Victor Legorreta, in Mexico City's historic center.

Mathematician Alonso García Bravo made a rough design of the city's vast grid plan in the sixteenth century, establishing a European-style grid plan that centers on what is called the Zócalo in the Centro Histórico. The Eje Central Lázaro Cárdenas (shown from two perspectives, right) is part of a vast north-south roadway that also bisects this district.



Mexico City—sprawling, dynamic, perennially troubled, with a population of about 20 million and a history as rich as any metropolis in the hemisphere—has recently experienced bursts of renewal in several key neighborhoods. Now an ambitious effort is under way to reinvigorate the capital's historic downtown district, Centro Histórico. The initiative involves both public agencies and scores of private investors, but its prime mover is Carlos Slim Helú, a Lebanese-Mexican engineer who is the country's wealthiest citizen and, according to *Forbes*, the fourth-richest person in the world.

In 2002, Slim established a nonprofit foundation (Fundación del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México) to help promote downtown revitalization. Slim is a telecommunications and real estate mogul with a net worth of nearly \$24 billion; his holdings include restaurants, Sears stores, CompUSA, Prodigy, and a controlling interest in Telmex, the country's largest telephone company. Slim's substantial real estate portfolio in the Centro includes seven floors of the 44-story Torre Latinoamericana, a 1950s-era icon that was Mexico's first skyscraper, and dozens of commercial and residential buildings.

The foundation emerged after Slim, Mexico City's then new mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador

(who resigned last year to run for president in 2006), and the federal government agreed to work together to save the ailing district. A third of its permanent residents had moved away since the 1970s; it still had not fully recovered from the 1985 earthquakes (which hit hardest in the historic zone) and was struggling with persistent crime and poverty.

"The Centro started to seriously decline in the 1950s," urban planner Manuel Perló says. "A major loss was the old UNAM [the national university], which used to occupy many buildings downtown and played a big part in the life of the district. So the efforts being made now aren't just about renovating buildings, they're also about providing amenities that will bring people back to the Centro not just to visit but to live full-time."

The Centro is a pedestrian-friendly district covering roughly 3.6 square miles, with the vast Plaza de la Constitución (known as the Zócalo) at its center. In the sixteenth century Spanish settlers laid down the Centro's European-style grid of streets on the rectilinear urban plan that had remained from the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. Using stones from the temples and monuments they tore down, the Spanish built their own edifices, such as the mammoth baroque Metropolitan Cathedral at the northern end of the





In recent years, as streets in the historic district have been reclaimed, dozens of new restaurants, cafés, and shops have sprung up—and the crime rate has dropped.

Zócalo. Many corporations moved out of the neighborhood decades ago to office towers to the west, but government offices and retail establishments still maintain an important presence in the historic district.

The city first proposed a redevelopment plan for the neighborhood in 1998, but politicians paid lip service to it and the initiative foundered. It was probably the rebirth in the past decade of the Polanco and Condesa districts by private homeowners, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, design studios, and media companies that prompted investors like Slim and the city to recognize the Centro as a strong commercial asset worthy of overhaul.

The Centro's great attraction remains the scale and character of its urban plan. But over the years the neighborhood had become run down. Since 2002, the city (through an agency called the Historic Center of Mexico City Trust) has spent roughly \$47 million on infrastructure upgrades: replacing water mains, burying power lines, repaving streets, and recruiting architects to supervise the refurbishing of more than 300 building facades. At nearly the same time, private investors poured almost a half billion dollars into the Centro, acquiring and renovating properties, and setting up businesses. Slim installed Telmex call centers in office buildings in the zone; his foundation helped organize and disperse small-business loans and social-services programs for residents in the district.

Another collaborator in the project, the real-estate company also called Centro Histórico, buys and renovates buildings, subsidizing rents to avoid displacing existing tenants, as well as aiding building owners or merchants who want to upgrade their properties. Generally when it acquires a structure and begins to renovate, the company bears the expense of relocating tenants for the duration of reconstruction and then brings them back to settle into their refurbished retail spaces and apartments once work is completed. "They try to prevent gentrification from forcing people out of places that have long been their homes—for some families, sometimes for generations," says Adrián Pandál, the young director of the Fundación del Centro Histórico.

The practice, he believes, allows certain streets that are known for their distinctive commercial character—such as a section in the southeast quadrant of the Centro where sewing-machine shops have long clustered—to maintain their traditional ambience. This seemingly altruistic effort has an obvious political dimension: elected officials in the district clearly don't want to provoke the wrath of voters who might be priced out of a gentrified neighborhood.

In recent years, as streets in the historic district have been reclaimed, dozens of new restaurants, cafés, and shops have **continued on page 119**

Built in the heart of the Centro Histórico—just across the street from the colonial-era Alameda Park—the Hotel Bamer (shown here) is temporarily obstructed by construction vehicles and debris.



From 1956 until 1984, the Torre Latinoamericana (opposite page) was the city's tallest building. Designed by the architect Augusto Ho, it survived the 1957 and 1985 earthquakes. Carlos Slim Helú now owns seven of the tower's 44 floors.

This page: Situated nearby is the Casa de Azulejos (House of Tiles). Moorish-style tile work on the facade (right) dates back to the eighteenth century. A branch of the Sanborn's restaurant chain, owned by Slim but run by his son, now occupies the interior courtyard (far right); it features a mural by José Clemente Orozco.

Made of Carrara marble, the Palacio de Bellas Artes (below) by Italian architect Adamo Boari has been sinking into the city's muddy soil since construction was completed in 1934.



Slim City, Mexico

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sprung up—and the crime rate has dropped. “Taking a comprehensive approach to renovating an entire section of a city—as opposed to just a single building or site—may be more common in Europe or the United States, but it’s still something new for us,” Pandál says.

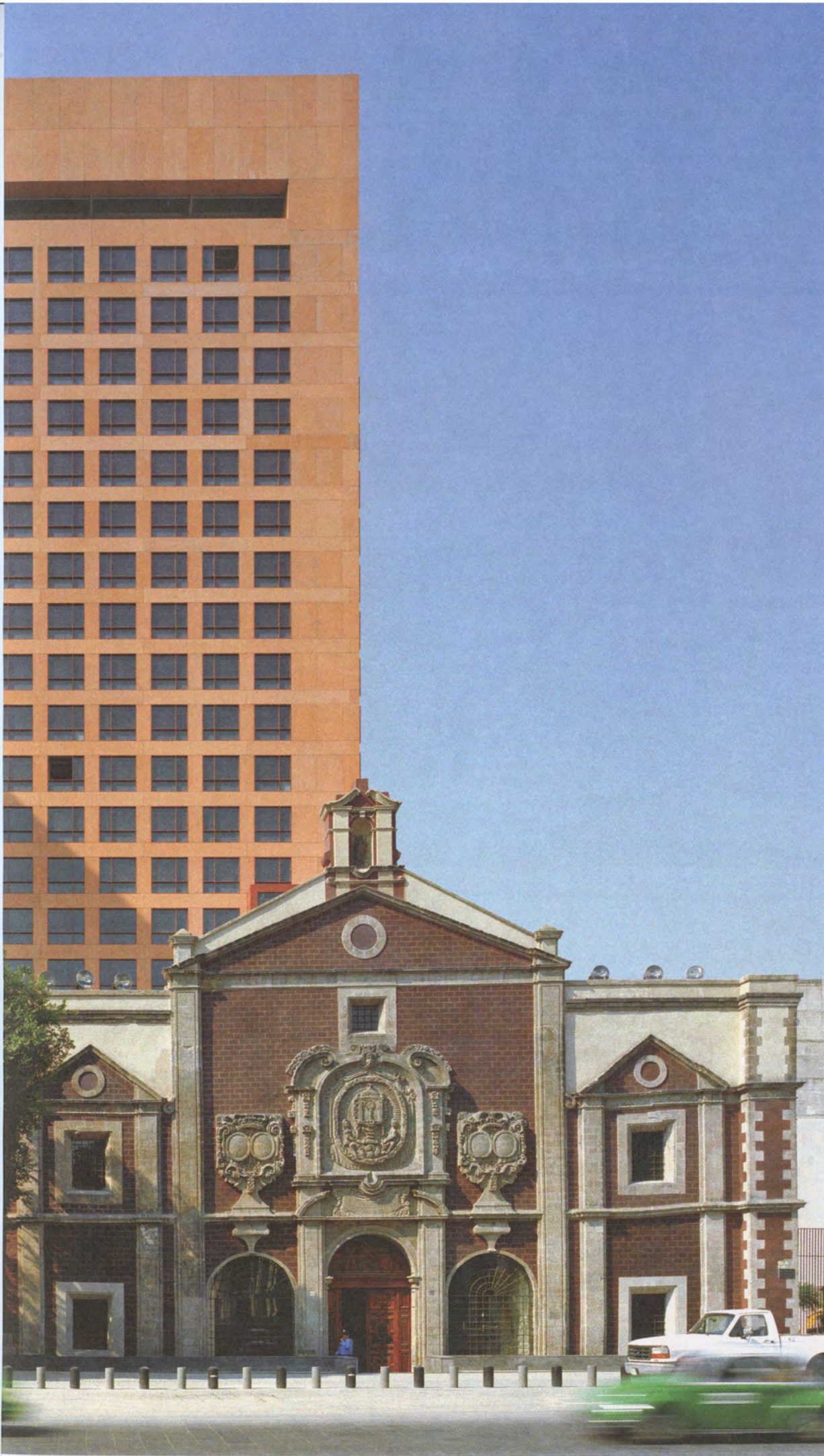
To address overcrowding, the city is moving the hordes of sidewalk vendors away from the Centro’s busiest thoroughfares. A major reason for ousting them is that retailers paying high rents for legitimate spaces resent the itinerant sellers, who block access to their stores and do not pay taxes. “Congestion is a real problem, but the vendors can’t all be chased out,” Pandál says. “They’re a big part of the history, character, and culture of the Centro.”

The public-private partnership transforming the Centro has not completed its work. With elections coming up in July, the ruling party of Mexico City will no doubt take full credit for the progress made there. And now that the effort has shown tangible results, the winning candidates are expected to keep supporting it—and maybe even start tossing out fresh ideas about how to tackle the problems in the unsafe run-down neighborhoods north and east of the Centro. If those areas are ignored, they could undermine the revival downtown, making it appear as if its backers are primarily concerned with “investment-worthy” properties in the historic district at the expense of residents in other sectors.

Mexico City remains a megalopolis with profound problems: a dwindling water supply, chronic air pollution, crime, and inadequate housing for millions of desperately poor people. Some critics argue that the Centro effort will ultimately benefit only the economic elite. But a thriving historic district, with the kind of vitality now found in the Polanco and Condesa districts, would undoubtedly raise working and living standards for a broader swath of the city’s population. For many it would also be the realization of a long-held dream: the transformation of Mexico City from a regional cultural center to an international capital whose main attraction is the quality and character of its built environment.

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SLIM CITY, MEXICO

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