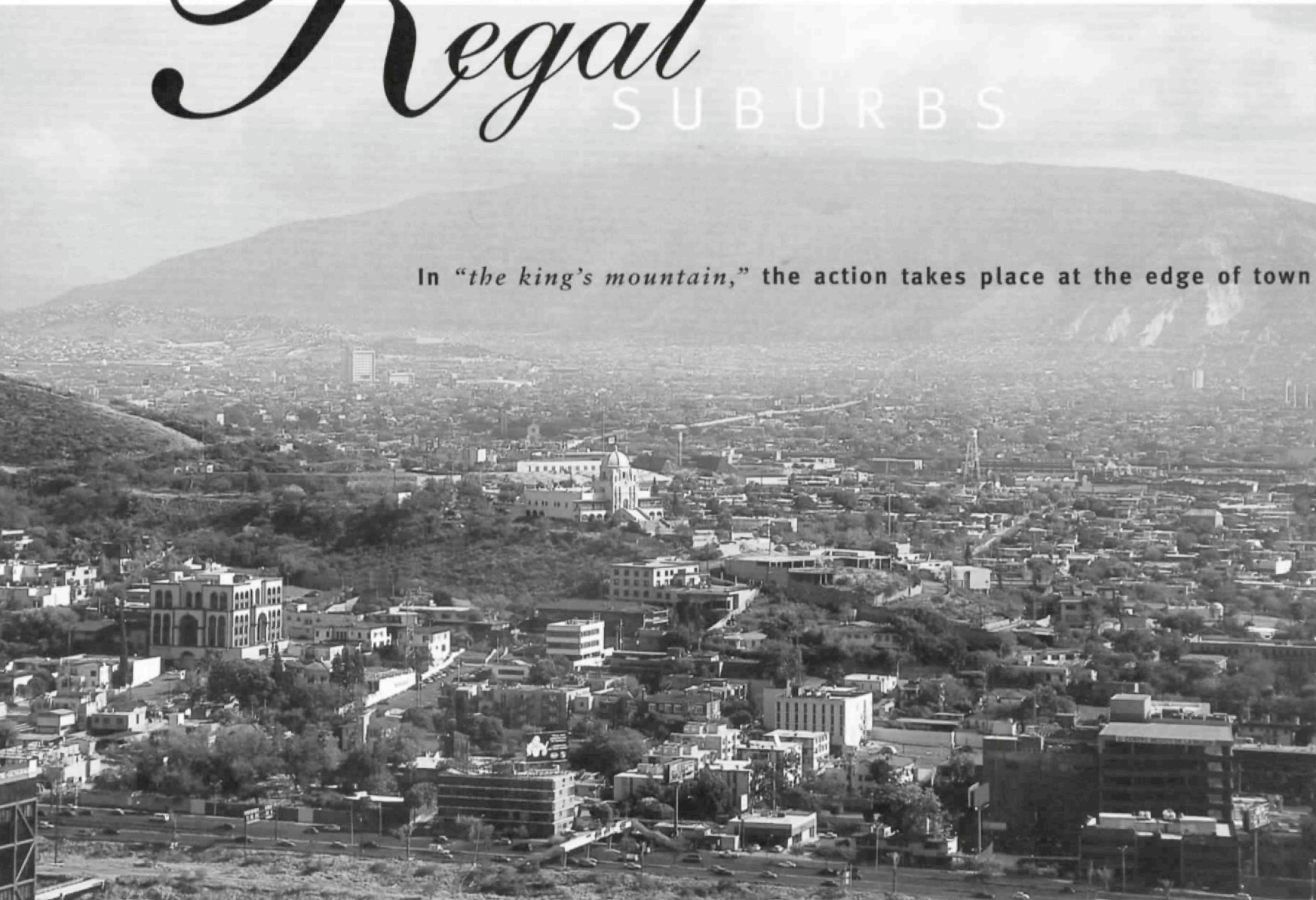


Regal

SUBURBS

In “the king’s mountain,” the action takes place at the edge of town



Monterrey, looking west. The Palacio del Obispado is in the center. The Colonia Obispado wraps around its base.

TRADITIONALLY, cities of Spanish origin were characterized by strong urban centers. Office buildings sat side by side with residential buildings, which were often several stories high. That model is still visible in many Latin American cities (including Mexico City, Bogota, Caracas, Buenos Aires, and Lima), but it has been losing strength. Latin American cities are growing through their residential suburbs — which means that they look like Monterrey.

Visitors to Monterrey scarcely recognize the city’s Hispanic heritage. It looks like a North American city: Wide streets bearing high-speed traffic connect downtown to residential suburbs. But in fact, Monterrey’s suburbs have existed longer than most North American cities.

CENTRALITY AND SUBURBS

In 1573, King Felipe II of Spain ordered that all the cities in his dominion plan

themselves on an orderly grid. Monterrey was founded 23 years later as a metropolitan city — that is, a seat of regional government and religious administration — but for nearly 200 years, despite the plans, the city refused to develop a proper urban core. The area’s economy was based on farming and ranching (at least 25 agricultural haciendas, or ranches, existed in the current metropolitan zone), and farming does not encourage urbanism. Other cities coalesced around their major industries. Mining drew workers to Guanajuato and Zacatecas. Commercial, religious, and regional military economies concentrated people in Puebla, Morelia, and Guadalajara. But in Monterrey, to the consternation of the city’s authorities, the great majority of the population preferred to live on haciendas on the periphery of town. Authorities repeatedly directed property owners to build houses in the city, and in 1660 they even threat-

ened to fine those who did not reside in the urban zone; the ordinance was invoked on various occasions.

It wasn’t until the 19th century, when Monterrey’s economic base changed, that the city assumed an urban form. In 1783, when the Diocese of Monterrey was established, the city became a religious center. And in 1848, when an international border was established with the United States, Monterrey became the commercial and military center of northeastern Mexico.

If at any time Monterrey grew in the manner of Spanish urban centers, it was between 1790 and 1890, when a well-aligned grid system with a series of central plazas was designed. In 1865, when Monterrey had 15,000 inhabitants, a plan for grid-based growth encompassed approximately 700 hectares (1,680 acres), housing a population of 150,000 or more. But three revolutionary innovations

BY JUAN IGNACIO BARRAGÁN VILLARREAL



doomed that plan: railroads, large industries, and residential suburbs.

In 1883, railroad tracks began to cross the city with no respect for its street grid, and establishments began to locate themselves in relation to rail lines — and outside the limits of the 1865 grid. The breakdown accelerated in the 1890s when large factory precincts appeared outside the historic grid. The *Cervecería Cuauhtémoc*, Monterrey's first brewery, was built to the north of the historic core in 1890; then the American Smelting Company, also to the north in 1891, then Foundry Number 2 to the east at Peñoles in 1892; then, also to the east, the Monterrey Iron and Steel Foundry of 1901; and finally the *Vidriera Monterrey*, the glassworks, to the north in 1909. Each of these industries built large, walled enclaves that blocked the street grid of 1865. The enclaves forced new avenues to branch off the grid, generating new axes of urban growth.

THE FIRST RESIDENTIAL COLONIAS

Several factories began to develop housing for their workers either near or within their installations — and therefore outside the grid. The American Smelting Company and Monterrey Foundry built inside their industrial enclaves, and other enterprises promoted residential subdivisions (*colonias*) beside their plants. Monterrey's suburban dispersion had begun.

In 1901 the *Cervecería Cuauhtémoc* established the first suburban residential

colonia to house its technical and managerial staff. The *Colonia Bella Vista*, just north of the brewery, was developed by a U.S. entrepreneur, Colonel Joseph Robinson, but its success was hampered by the economic crisis the country suffered between 1910 and 1920, the decade of the Mexican Revolution. Nevertheless, some English-style chalets (the Mexican term for free-standing single-family houses with their own gardens) were constructed in *Bella Vista* and still survive.

With the return of political stability and economic growth came *Colonia El Mirador*, Monterrey's first successful suburban subdivision, and the first modern subdivision in Mexico. Curiously, this neighborhood was located inside the area of the 1865 grid, in a tract west of the central core.

The 1865 plan had not included the tract because it contained *El Mirador*, a grand country house constructed by General Mariano Arista and later enlarged by an important businessman, Gregorio Zambrano. In 1920, Zambrano's grandson, Lorenzo Zambrano Gutiérrez, built the *Cemento Monterrey* factory, now part of today's *Grupo CEMEX*. Around 1925, when Zambrano developed his family's *Mirador* property, he naturally used his company's products. *Colonia El Mirador* is noteworthy for its concrete streets and sidewalks. *Cemento Monterrey* made sure that the innovation caught on. Its magazine, *Cemento*, used images of *El Mirador* to promote concrete.

Colonia El Mirador wasn't, strictly speaking, a suburb, even though it possessed many suburban characteristics, such as relatively large house sites, wooded areas, and concrete streets intended for intensive automobile use. The predominant architectural styles were Andalusian and Californian, though other styles were also built. Today a movement exists to defend the historic heritage of *El Mirador*, which is seriously affected by conversion of houses to offices and businesses.

After *El Mirador*, other residential colonias, such as the *Colonia María Luísa* and the *Colonia Obispado*, developed west of the city. The installation and expansion of Monterrey's potable water infrastructure, begun around 1909, freed developers from having to situate new neighborhoods near traditional sources of water.

The *Colonia María Luísa* was developed at the end of the 1920s near the *Cerro del Obispado* (*Obispado Hill*), at what seemed to be the western limit of Monterrey's urban expansion. At the foot of the hill, the traditional right-angled block and street grid could not be applied, so the next subdivision, the *Colonia Obispado*, broke drastically with the scheme and was laid out around the base of the hill, with streets aligned along the contour lines.

The hill had an aristocratic character. Since 1790 it had been occupied by the Bishop's Summer Palace (now the *Museo Regional El Obispado*). The property was

expropriated by the federal government in 1859, and was finally sold to private citizens around 1922. In 1925, when the hill's lower reaches were developed as the *Colonia Obispado*, it became Monterrey's first true suburb. The buyers were the city's most prominent business leaders, along with the managers of foreign firms; they built elegant European-style residences whose terraces commanded views of Monterrey from on high. To one side of the hill were Monterrey's first golf club, the *Monterrey Country Club*, and a sports club, *El Club Deportivo Obispado*, which contained tennis courts, swimming pools, and polo grounds.

From 1935 to 1965, the *Colonia Obispado* was the headquarters of Monterrey's social elite. It was filled with large gardens and grand houses containing more than 1,000 square meters — 10,000 square feet — of living space. The earliest architecture was based on historic European styles, but residents soon began to adopt more modern forms, mostly inspired by conservative models from the United States.

Unfortunately, the *Colonia Obispado* began to decline after the private clubs moved away. The *Monterrey Country Club* left in 1936; *Club Hípico* in 1940; and *Club Deportivo Obispado* in 1960. The clubs' land was redeveloped, but upscale residents followed the clubs to new neighborhoods.

The colonia also came to be surrounded by middle-income developments,

Far left: The *Colonia Bella Vista*, Monterrey's first suburban residential colonia, housed the brewery's managerial and technical staff.

Second from left: *Colonia El Mirador* pioneered the use of cement.

Third and fourth from left: From 1935 to 1965, Monterrey's social elite built grand houses in the *Colonia Obispado*.



Three views of San Pedro Garza García: Gone with the Wind-style house in Colonia del Valle; Calzada del Valle; and an HEB store.

such as the Colonias Vista Hermosa, Mitras, and Lomas de Chepe Vera, which generated traffic. The final blow to the neighborhood came as its original inhabitants aged and began to move to smaller houses. Young families could not afford to buy the large residences, which were slowly transformed into schools, offices, and commercial buildings. Today the Colonia Obispado has lost much of its beauty, and its former prestige has completely disappeared. Its torch has been passed to a suburb outside Monterrey's city limits.

THE COLONIA DEL VALLE

In 1946, Alberto, Manuel and Ignacio Santos established the Colonia del Valle some five kilometers south of Monterrey's city limits. The valley lay near the San Pedro Garza García municipality, and was separated from Monterrey by the Loma Larga, a large hill, and the Río Santa Catarina, which is dry almost all year long. The valley boasted certain natural advantages: flat terrain; fertile soil, which was then intensively cultivated with vegetables and fruits; splendid views of the Sierra Madre Oriental to the south and the Cerro de las Mitras to the northwest; and a climate slightly cooler than Monterrey's. Two summer resort colonias already existed in the area.

The Colonia del Valle's extraordinary success transformed the Mexican system of urban residential development, and San Pedro is held up as a model municipality, the most advanced in Mexico. Its successes rest on several foundations. First is the size of the Colonia del Valle: Its 400 hectares (approximately 960 acres) permitted orderly development on a scale never before attempted in Mexico, making it the 1940s equivalent of a planned community. The developers contributed land and money for the construction of two large private schools and an imposing parish church. For years they subsidized the owner of El Centrito, del Valle's specially designed business district, and for 25 years they financed and administered all public services.

The developers incrementally transferred their administrative authority to the residents of the Colonia del Valle by creating the equivalent of a Texas-style

municipal utility district, the first of its kind in Mexico. The new administrative structure led to a high level of citizen participation in a country whose political institutions were typically characterized by paternalism.

In terms of urban design, the Colonia del Valle introduced a modern, designed landscape marked by two beautiful avenues 70 meters wide and divided by landscaped medians 30 meters wide. Del Valle also took advantage of existing, tree-lined irrigation ditches so that from the start the neighborhood was endowed with large trees. To stimulate the market, the developers built a number of luxurious residences that they sold at low prices. And in a country where mortgage loans were still new, they established modern financing mechanisms for buying lots and building houses. Simultaneously, the Club Campestre, one of the most prestigious social clubs in Mexico, was established to one side of del Valle in 1954.

The development of the Colonia del Valle took approximately 25 years. By 1960 other colonias, such as Fuentes del Valle, El Rosario, Mira Sierra, San Jerónimo, San Patricio, Veredalta, Valle de San Angel, and San Agustín, were added nearby. This process culminated in the 1990s with the development of Valle Oriente, where today the most important office and corporate buildings in northern Mexico are gathered along with an important commercial and hotel district.

As a unit, the suburbs around the Colonia del Valle make up the better part of San Pedro Garza García, which has the highest living standard and highest per-capita incomes in Mexico. San Pedro Garza García is known for its innovations. It is the place where, in 1963, a mayor from an opposition party first took office, and where, in 1966, the first woman mayor in northern Mexico took power. It was also the first city to have a master plan for drainage that brought potable water, drainage, and electricity to 100 percent of the city's houses.

Considered a pioneer in citizen participation in decision making, San Pedro Garza García also achieved consistent and high standards of urban development and modern environmental control as

well as an efficient tax collection system. It has the highest number of police per thousand inhabitants in Mexico, and one of the lowest urban-zone crime rates in the Americas. As if that were not enough, more than 70 percent of the high-quality educational institutions in the metropolitan area of Monterrey are located on its territory. Its autonomy is such that, according to the city's transportation agency, more than 50 percent of San Pedro Garza García's residents go to Monterrey only when they cross it en route to the airport. San Pedro has not escaped problems common to all urban areas. It suffers from traffic, noise, confrontations between environmentalists and developers, and the destruction of historically significant buildings. But the municipality confronts these problems in a much more civilized manner than do cities in the rest of Mexico.

CUMBRES AND CONTRY

The majority of the upper-income inhabitants of metropolitan Monterrey are concentrated around the Colonia del Valle, but it is not the only upper-income suburban area in the city. The Colonia Mitras was established in 1948, and the Colonia Cumbres was added in 1957; the Colonia Contry arrived in 1958. These two suburbs began with 250 and 300 hectares respectively (600 and 720 acres) and grew in ways similar to the colonias around them.

The Colonias Contry and Cumbres certainly offer advantages to their upper-income inhabitants, having been developed on a scale sufficient to offer order and space for recreation, sports and services. Contry and Cumbres are far superior to the hundreds of small neighborhoods of less than ten hectares that developed by aggregation, linking themselves haphazardly to the historic center. But Contry and Cumbres lack the integrated development, quality of life, and functional autonomy of San Pedro.

For various reasons, Cumbres and Contry never had the impact of del Valle. Neither was conceived with the integrated vision of the Colonia del Valle, and neither achieved del Valle's relative autonomy or distinct lifestyle. Even though each was developed at a distance

from the center of Monterrey, both are inside the city limits, No physical barriers separate them from the rest of the city and the rapid urbanization and growth it experienced in the second half of the twentieth century. And inside Monterrey, they lack the political clout exerted by heavily populated working-class neighborhoods and the historic center. Cumbres and Contry never had sufficient weight to transform Monterrey.

THE NEW SUBURBS OF MONTERREY

New developments in metropolitan Monterrey emulate Colonia del Valle. These suburban zones on the metropolitan perimeter offer an ordered development scheme with a mixture of land uses and an integrated master plan. To the south of the city, beyond the Colonia Contry, a new urban district known as El Huajuco is contemplated. This will contain several large developments covering between 50 and 500 hectares, for a total of 1,500 hectares (3,600 acres).

A group of large landowners are jointly developing the area as a planned community. Despite the difficulties of managing such a large development when potential competitors are involved, El Huajuco could become Monterrey's new residential suburb par excellence, improving on previous models by preserving wooded areas.

The other large-scale project, Valle Poniente (Valley West), is located to the west of the city. Valle Poniente covers a developable area of 700 hectares (1,680 acres), and the land is controlled by only three competing property owners.

These projects are still in the planning stages, but they represent new versions of a distinctly Monterrey style of development. And they reinforce Monterrey's reputation as a city planned in the image of a North American suburban metropolis. ■

Juan Ignacio Barragán Villarreal is a planner for the state of Nuevo León, an architect, historian and the founder of Urbis Internacional.

Translated from Spanish by David Theis.