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Symbolic Extractivism and Grassroots Resistance in Mexico City's 2026 World Cup

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Symbolic Extractivism and Grassroots Resistance in Mexico City's 2026 World Cup

Abstract: Ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Mexico City has undergone an intense aesthetic mutation characterized by ajolotización: the ubiquitous deployment of the endangered axolotl across transit networks and urban murals to greenwash market-driven development. Grounded in urban political ecology, this article investigates the socio-spatial paradox between this state-sponsored visual blitz and the ongoing ecological collapse of the axolotl's native habitat in the chinampas of Xochimilco. The article advances the framework of symbolic extractivism to argue that the state capitalizes on the mega-event's infrastructural state of exception to mine the biological, mythic, and indigenous currency of the axolotl, converting a fragile organism into a corporate mascot for global sports capital. Theoretically, the article bridges Latin American critiques of cosmética urbana (urban cosmetics) with global theories of spectacle urbanism and decolonial ecology (Buen Vivir). Empirically, the study examines how grassroots chinampero collectives contest this aesthetic co-optation, reclaiming the mythic essence of Xolotl to assert autonomy over their hydrosocial territories through the eco-territorial turn.

Keywords: Ajolotización, Symbolic Extractivism, Cosmética Urbana, Spectacle Urbanism, Eco-Territorial Turn.

Resumen: De cara a la Copa Mundial de la FIFA 2026, la Ciudad de México ha experimentado una intensa mutación estética caracterizada por la ajolotización: el despliegue ubicuo del ajolote, especie en peligro crítico de extinción, en las redes de transporte y murales urbanos para encubrir con un lavado verde (*greenwashing*) el desarrollo urbano impulsado por el mercado. Desde la ecología política urbana, este

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artículo investiga la paradoja socioespacial entre este despliegue visual patrocinado por el Estado y el continuo colapso ecológico del hábitat nativo del ajolote en las chinampas de Xochimilco. El artículo propone el marco del extractivismo simbólico para argumentar que el Estado capitaliza el estado de excepción infraestructural del megaevento para extraer el valor biológico, mítico e indígena del ajolote, convirtiendo a un organismo frágil en una mascota corporativa al servicio del capital deportivo global. Teóricamente, el trabajo tiende puentes entre las críticas latinoamericanas de la cosmética urbana y las teorías globales del urbanismo del espectáculo y la ecología decolonial (Buen Vivir). Empíricamente, el estudio examina cómo los colectivos chinamperos de base disputan esta cooptación estética, reivindicando la esencia mítica de Xólotl para afirmar la autonomía sobre sus territorios hidrosociales a través del giro ecoterritorial.

Palabras clave: Ajolotización, Extractivismo Simbólico, Cosmética Urbana, Urbanismo del Espectáculo, Giro Ecoterritorial.

Introduction

In anticipation of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Mexico City has initiated an intense aesthetic and infrastructural mutation. Central to this rebranding is *ajolotización*: the ubiquitous visual deployment of the critically endangered endemic amphibian, the Ambystoma mexicanum, across modernized transit networks like the newly expanded *Tren Ligero* (light rail). Known globally as the axolotl, derived from the classical Nahuatl āxōlōtl, meaning "water dog" or "water monster" in indigenous Mexica mythology, the creature is most commonly referred to in contemporary Mexican vernacular and official state branding by its Hispanized spelling, *ajolote*. Promoted by the municipal state as a symbol of "territorial justice" and eco-neoliberal sustainability, this purple-branded cultural icon stands in stark contrast to the material reality of the urban periphery: the ongoing ecological collapse of the axolotl's sole native habitat in the chinampas of Xochimilco (Narchi & Cristiani, 2015; Zambrano et al., 2020). This greenwashed facade effectively decouples the symbol from its environmental reality, insulating the state from its structural conservation failures.

This decoupling characterizes the political economy of global sports spectacles, but in 2026, the stakes for Mexico are exceptionally high. Beyond the prestige of the Estadio Azteca becoming the first venue in history to host a World Cup opening match for a third time, the tournament arrives at a critical geopolitical juncture. Co-hosting the mega-event alongside the United States and Canada coincides directly

with the impending, highly contested renegotiations of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). In this context, the mega-event functions as a vital diplomatic and economic showcase. As Martin Müller (2015) conceptualizes, large-scale events frequently succumb to the "mega-event syndrome," wherein host cities deploy extraordinary policy mechanisms to fast-track massive physical makeovers. John Horne (2007) emphasizes that these spectacles act as external metropolitan shocks, compelling local states to abruptly fabricate "world-class" visual regimes for international capital. Leveraging this impending deadline and the intense scrutiny of its North American trade partners, the municipal government capitalizes on the mega-event's infrastructural "state of exception" (Kassens-Noor, 2016; Lauermann, 2019; Talitha, 2025) to bypass standard democratic deliberations and justify an aggressive, top-down visual orchestration of the built environment.

Beneath this playful, purple-hued discourse of territorial justice lies a profound spatial and ecological paradox. While the *ajolote* caricature proliferates across modernized transport hubs, Xochimilco's actual lacustrine ecosystem languishes in terminal neglect, its canals choked by pollution and starved of water table recharge. To theorize this paradox, this article examines how the state weaponizes localized ecological iconography to legitimize exclusionary mega-event urbanism. Utilizing Guy Debord's (2006) critique of the spectacle alongside Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theories of spatial production, the study argues that *ajolotización* functions as a highly sophisticated regime of *cosmética urbana* (urban cosmetics). Here, the state extracts the biological and cultural currency of a fragile organism, transforming it into a circulating commodity-image to format the built environment for international consumption, driving capital accumulation precisely as the material ecosystem is degraded (Delgadillo, 2014; Castree, 2008).

This strategy of masking deep-seated infrastructural crises with hyper-visible, progressive branding is not unique to Mexico City; it is a well-established extractivist logic inherent to contemporary mega-events in the Global South. As Levy (2016) documents regarding the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil and the 2010 tournament in South Africa, global sporting spectacles consistently trigger massive socio-economic displacement, prioritizing the circulation of international tourists and capital over local developmental needs. In these contexts, the media and the state often promote a "redemption to modernization" narrative that serves as a developmental trigger, forcing developing nations to comply with global aesthetics while incurring enormous social and financial debts, often leading to the forced removal of communities as seen in Rio de Janeiro's favelas (Levy, 2016). In Mexico

City, this dynamic manifests through targeted transit investments designed to channel international spectators seamlessly through the metropolis, thereby accelerating transit-induced gentrification (TIG) and exacerbating the splintering of the urban periphery.

Ultimately, however, this top-down imposition of abstract space is actively contested. Moving beyond a simple critique of greenwashing, this article centers on the local response to these infrastructural transformations. Following Levy and Sarmento's (2020) observation that local communities frequently "piggyback" on the hyper-visibility of mega-events to amplify their own grievances and disguise their activism within the event's narrative, this study highlights how grassroots *chinampero* collectives in Xochimilco actively subvert the state's aesthetic co-optation. By reclaiming the radical, mythic essence of Xolotl, these subaltern movements expose the failures of state-sponsored progressive propaganda, asserting instead a demand for authentic, material autonomy over their hydrosocial territories.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 traces the deep mythic and cultural currency of the axolotl, contextualizing *ajolotización* within historical lineages of internal colonialism and contemporary eco-neoliberalism. Section 2 examines this aesthetic strategy across the built environment, utilizing theories of spectacle urbanism and *cosmética urbana* to demonstrate how premium World Cup infrastructure masks metropolitan fractures and triggers transit-induced gentrification. Finally, Section 3 highlights subaltern resistance, exploring how Xochimilco's *chinamperos* utilize the mega-event's visibility to reclaim their hydrosocial territories. By contrasting the state-enforced illusions of territorial justice with the grassroots demand for radical spatial justice, this final section outlines how the eco-territorial turn and decolonial ecologies like Buen Vivir offer paths toward authentic territorial sovereignty.

Symbolic Extractivism and the Mining of Indigenous-Ecological Heritage

It is important to note that this extraction relies heavily on the profound and often contradictory symbolism of the axolotl. As Roger Bartra (1987) explores in *La Jaula de la Melancolía*, the axolotl has long functioned as an ambivalent figure of Mexican consciousness, representing a tension between a "larval primitivism" tied to a mythic national past and the metamorphic push toward modernity. Hence, by selecting the axolotl as the face of its modernized transit network and the broader infrastructural modernization of World Cup Mexico City, a phenomenon critics refer to as *ajolotización*, the state attempts to resolve this tension aesthetically, projecting

an image of a nation that has successfully metamorphosed into a modern, sustainable power. This deployment of the axolotl as a symbol functions much like the masks described by Octavio Paz (2020) in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: silence, irony, and the formalization of social life act as masks that permit the Mexican to conceal their true personality. As such, in the context of mega-event urbanism, the smiling, purple axolotl serves as the ultimate state mask, a formalized aesthetic that conceals the underlying socio-ecological decay of the periphery, where the actual animal is relegated to poorly maintained reservations in Xochimilco.

If the objective is to critique this phenomenon, which involves the use of symbols to mask the nature of the state represented in its urban expansions, then it is crucial to approach it through the lenses of extractivism. To critique this phenomenon, it is necessary to look through Macarena Gómez-Barris's (2017) framework of the "Extractive Zone," which exposes how corporate and state power operates through a specific epistemic and visual reductionism. Parallel to this, as some scholars have recently noted, extractivism is no longer confined to the physical removal of raw materials; it functions as a central organizing logic of contemporary capitalism (Chagnon et al., 2022; Durante et al., 2021). Indeed, it is driven by an 'extractive ontologic', i.e., a deeply ingrained, violent logic of taking resources without reciprocity or ecological stewardship (Durante et al., 2021). In Mexico City, this manifests through what Paula Serafini (2020, 2025) conceptualizes as 'cultural extractivism.' Under this framework, state and cultural institutions actively reproduce extractivist logics through the co-optation of marginalized cultures and the greenwashing of extractive projects. Specifically, by appropriating the imagery and values of Indigenous or marginalized groups to construct a superficial imaginary of diversity and sustainability, the state successfully masks its ongoing material dispossession of the periphery.

By deploying an extractive framework, the state gazes upon the complex, biodiverse, and sacred socio-ecologies of subaltern communities and deliberately flattens them into discrete, visually digestible commodities. This dynamic creates a stark opposition between the "scientific" reality of the axolotl and its "literary" or branded representation. This tension arises because the state capitalizes on a floating opposition, a tension Susan Antebi (2008) highlights in her analysis of the animal's literary genetics. Allowing the branded image of the axolotl to circulate freely in the global market while ignoring the scientific reality of its imminent extinction in the wild reveals the state's true priorities.

Under the current administration of Clara Brugada, the Head of Government of Mexico City, this symbolic extraction has materialized as a totalizing visual campaign. The state effectively neutralizes political opposition when it cloaks immense, top-down infrastructural projects in the friendly, endemic imagery of Xochimilco, a working-class neighborhood located in the periphery of Mexico City where canals and endemic species like the axolotl are still preserved. As Claudio Lomnitz-Adler (1995) argues in *Las Salidas del Laberinto*, the Mexican state frequently relies on ideological representations of a common identity and shared past without examining the actual spatial organization and concrete realities of where that culture is produced. The state's sudden romance with the axolotl perfectly illustrates this "vicious circle" of hegemony; it celebrates a representation of national culture while actively destroying the specific regional culture (the chinampas) that birthed it.

In this context, this aestheticized management of space connects directly to the underlying political economy of contemporary urban governance, operating as a local manifestation of what David Harvey (1989) terms entrepreneurial urbanism. The state structures the symbolic economy of Mexico City to frame a highly exclusive, mega-event infrastructure project as a celebratory public asset. Furthermore, the choice of the axolotl as the mascot for the 2026 World Cup is inextricably linked to the animal's recent explosion in global popular culture, particularly its popularity as a stuffed toy and digital pet for children in the United States. The state is not merely extracting a local symbol; it is capitalizing on a pre-existing, sanitized global commodity, ensuring the mascot is instantly recognizable and consumable for the international tourists and liberal global markets the World Cup attracts. To conceptualize this dual dynamic, Figure 1 maps the structural mechanics of this extractive gaze, illustrating how the state's bifurcation of symbolic and material extraction directly necessitates the grassroots counter-territorial defense that will be explored in later sections.

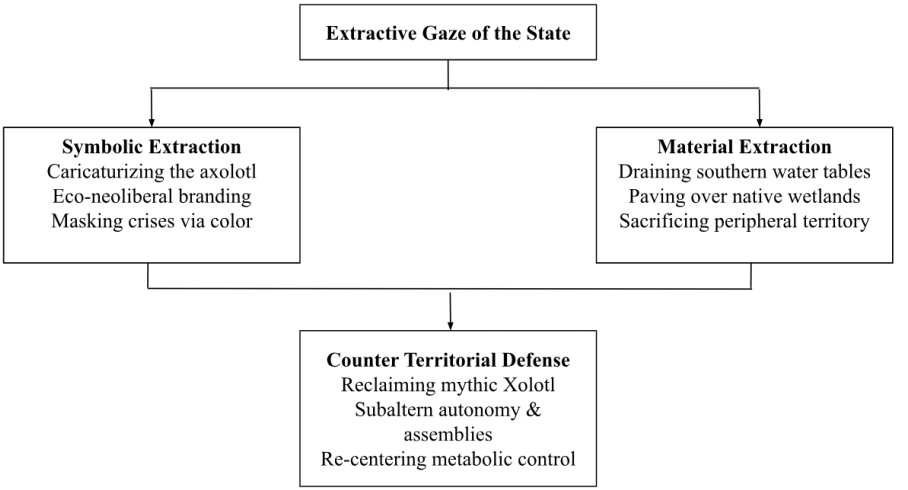


Figure 1. The structural bifurcations of the state's extractive gaze versus grassroots socio-ecological counter-defense.

The Evolution of Internal Colonialism: From Indigenismo to Eco-Neoliberalism

As captured in the pastel-purple public infrastructure of Figure 2, the *ajolotización* of Mexico City, a state-sponsored urban branding campaign that saturates the built environment with stylized imagery of the endemic axolotl, functions as a structural mechanism that violently tears the symbol of the amphibian away from its material, ecological, and historical reality. This structural mechanism operates by appropriating subaltern iconography to legitimize top-down infrastructure projects, effectively silencing the communities that actually inhabit the represented ecosystems. In reality then, the process of *ajolotización* represents a contemporary, ecological adaptation of what Mexican sociologists have long theorized as internal colonialism, executed through the historical state apparatus of indigenismo.

For nearly a century, the post-revolutionary Mexican state has engaged in a deeply contradictory strategy: romanticizing, aestheticizing, and extracting dead or folkloric indigenous symbols to construct a unified, marketable national identity, while simultaneously enacting policies that economically marginalize and dispossess living indigenous and rural populations. As Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (2005) famously

argued in *México Profundo*, the state actively constructs an "imaginary Mexico" based on Western development models, while systematically suppressing the "deep Mexico" rooted in Mesoamerican civilization. This historical strategy highlights a continuity of statecraft that maps directly onto the foundational theories of Pablo González Casanova. González Casanova's (1965) formulation of internal colonialism underscores that colonial relations of domination, extraction, and asymmetric power do not disappear with national independence; instead, they are reproduced internally, with urban administrative cores structurally exploiting their own internal, peripheral colonies.

In the context of pre-World Cup Mexico City, the administrative core extracts the cultural capital of the southern wetland periphery to brand its gentrifying transit corridors, all while maintaining the unequal metabolic flows that drain Xochimilco of its water. By supplementing this framework with Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's (2003) critique of the post-revolutionary imagination, we can see how the state requires the "Indian" to remain a static figure of the past, thereby justifying ongoing developmentalist interventions that erase contemporary indigenous political agency. Similarly, through Luis Villoro's (1999) philosophy of indigenous alterity, it becomes evident that the state only accepts indigenous heritage when it is safely mediated and formalized by official institutions, rejecting any authentic alterity that threatens the dominant capitalist order. By unpacking these accounts, it is possible to see how the Mexican state historically deploys official indigenous heritage as an ideological shroud specifically designed to mute and disqualify the material, self-governing political agency of living indigenous populations. The contemporary administration's sudden and deep romance with the wetland periphery reproduces this exact paternalistic machinery, capturing the symbolic value of the south to legitimize an urban order that excludes the very people who produce and defend that landscape.



Figure 2. A pedestrian bridge and *Tren Ligero* carriage adorned with pastel-purple branding and stylized axolotl imagery, illustrating the city's widespread visual campaign.

The state's deployment of this aesthetic is neither accidental nor purely decorative; it is a highly calculated discursive strategy actively defended by the highest levels of government. In the weeks leading up to the 2026 World Cup, as the visual saturation of the city drew public scrutiny, the administration actively reappropriated the term *ajolotización*. Head of Government Clara Brugada publicly defended the campaign, declaring: "If *ajolotizar* means filling with color what was once grey, building utopias, drawing murals, transforming public space... then yes, we are *ajolotizando*" (Brugada, as cited in Cerezo, 2026; Romo de Vivar Guerra, 2026). This defense, publicly echoed by President Claudia Sheinbaum (La Redacción, 2026), illustrates a sophisticated mechanism of urban cosmetics, or *cosmética urban*a: by encoding mega-event infrastructure with the progressive signifiers of feminism and indigenous

resistance, the state effectively constructs an ideological shield. This discursive shielding is a textbook application of 'green extractivism,' a contemporary dynamic where destructive modes of accumulation are rebranded with narratives of sustainability and ecological transition (Andreucci et al., 2023; Dunlap, Verweijen, & Tornel, 2024). By promoting the mega-event's infrastructure through an eco-friendly vocabulary, the state successfully mobilizes green narratives to justify new rounds of resource appropriation and the continued sacrifice of the Xochimilco wetlands (Dunlap et al., 2024).

The culmination of this symbolic extractivism was the introduction of "*Ajologol*," the government-sponsored mascot representing Mexico City for the World Cup (Cerezo, 2026). This finalized the transformation of a critically endangered amphibian into a sanitized, consumable commodity for the global gaze, entirely divorced from the ongoing ecological collapse of its native Xochimilco, a marginalized, working-class periphery that continues to suffer from chronic infrastructural abandonment. However, highlighting the volatile nature of spectacle urbanism, the highly publicized installation of the "*Ajologol*" statue outside the Estadio Azteca was abruptly removed just weeks later. Although the municipal government officially attributed the removal to crowd control and civil protection, its sudden disappearance sparked intense public speculation that FIFA had objected to the localized mascot interfering with official tournament commercial zones (Meneses Arias, 2026; Cisneros, 2026). This sudden removal underscores that while the municipal state utilizes *ajolotización* to manage domestic populations, it remains ultimately subservient to the superseding visual regimes dictated by transnational sports capital.

Ajolotización operates under this exact same logic, merely updated for the eco-neoliberal era of the 2020s. The state explicitly defends the visual onslaught by framing it as a radical reclaiming of identity, calling the purple overpasses and transit lines an act of territorial justice for the historically neglected south of the city. Yet this rhetorical move performs a crucial sleight of hand: it attempts to compensate for a catastrophic lack of material, structural investment in peripheral communities by providing an overabundance of symbolic representation. The axolotl is structurally and biologically bound to the unique lacustrine space of Xochimilco. By translating this complex entity into a flat, globally circulating caricature, the state successfully transforms a fragile organism on the brink of extinction into a resilient corporate mascot.

The Weaponization of Xolotl: Mythology, Mega-Events, and the Global Gaze

The stark disconnect between the state's symbolic adulation of the axolotl and its material infrastructure becomes historically legible when evaluated through the lens of urban political ecology. The environmental degradation of the Valley of Mexico is hardly an accidental byproduct of modernization. Rather, Matthew Vitz (2018) demonstrates in A City on a Lake that it stems directly from historical state planning choices favoring desiccation, real estate expansion, and centralized hydraulic control over the preservation of the lacustrine basin. This structural alienation is further clarified by Dean Chahim's analysis of the "logistics of waste," through which engineers manage metropolitan wastewater flows so as to protect politically and economically important neighborhoods and urban investments while redirecting the burdens of flooding toward marginalized communities (Chahim, 2022). Far from treating flooding as a purely natural disaster, Chahim shows how its location, intensity, and social consequences are mediated by infrastructural operations that turn less powerful neighborhoods into temporary conduits and holding spaces for wastewater. Although Chahim's principal cases are not located in Xochimilco, his analysis provides a useful metropolitan framework for interpreting the unequal hydraulic relations within which the southern wetlands are situated.

The infrastructural transformation of World Cup Mexico City has pushed the wetland ecology past a tipping point. The relentless extraction of groundwater and the substitution of natural springs with treated sewage overflow have fundamentally severed the hydrological networks required to sustain the *chinampa* agro-ecosystem. As Zambrano et al. (2020) note, state-led wetland restoration efforts frequently fail because they address superficial aesthetics rather than repairing this fundamental hydrological disconnect. Thus, the act of superimposing a cheerful, purple-branded ecology over this violent hydraulic topography creates a profound contradiction, as the state celebrates the biology of an endangered amphibian while simultaneously driving its extinction through the broader, exclusionary expansion of the city's infrastructure. What this shows is that in order to fully grasp the violence of this extraction, one must recognize the profound heritage embedded within the amphibian. Historically rooted in Mexica mythology as Xolotl, the twin god of life, death, and monstrous transformation who morphed into an amphibious creature to escape sacrifice, the animal carries a heavy weight of indigenous resistance and liminality.

The political economy of sanitizing this mythic creature becomes painfully clear when juxtaposed with the looming 2026 FIFA World Cup. To make the megalopolis legible, safe, and attractive to global capital, international tourists, and FIFA sponsors, the state cannot simply present a generic, homogenized global space; doing so would fail to capture the highly lucrative, exotic tourist market. Instead, it requires an "authentic" and eco-friendly localized brand. The axolotl, famed worldwide for its scientific marvel of limb regeneration, is mined precisely because it supplies a perfect, ready-made metaphor for a city trying to market itself to the Global North as a self-renewing, sustainable, and modern destination.

This systematic manipulation of local heritage directly satisfies the structural demands of what Anne-Marie Broudehoux (2007) conceptualizes as spectacular urbanism. Drawing from critiques of recent mega-events, Broudehoux illustrates how host states consistently manufacture a Potemkin village effect, mobilizing massive visual, artistic, and architectural facades to screen out systemic social crises, human rights violations, and urban fractures from the view of global consumption. In pre-World Cup Mexico City, the ubiquitous deployment of the axolotl functions exactly as this spectacular facade, blinding international consumers to the systemic water crises and gentrification ravaging the capital. This aesthetic manipulation connects directly to the temporal urgency that governs international spectacles, a dynamic that forces host cities to prioritize immediate visual conformity over long-term structural equity. Maurice Roche (2000) theorizes this temporal urgency in his foundational sociology of Mega-Events and Modernity, which explains how international spectacles act as extraordinary catalysts that compel host cities to rapidly restructure their domestic visual regimes to align with international tourism standards. The current rebranding of Mexico City is a textbook deployment of this exceptional statecraft, where the deep mythic resonance of Xolotl is hollowed out, flattened, and refashioned into a corporate skin explicitly engineered to satisfy the gaze of global capital.

Cosmética Urbana and the Infrastructures of Grand Urbanism

The impending 2026 FIFA World Cup has catalyzed a massive reorganization of Mexico City's transit and pedestrian infrastructure, particularly along the southern corridors connecting the gentrifying urban core to the Estadio Azteca. However, this infrastructural overhaul is inherently contradictory: it must simultaneously modernize the megalopolis to meet the hyper-mobile demands of global capital while masking the deep, historical fissures of spatial inequality that such modernization inevitably exacerbates. Plastering the endangered axolotl across trains and station walls allows the state to cloak spaces of frictionless transit flow in hyper-

localized cultural markers. This effectively diverts attention from the alienating reality of globalized infrastructure and the transit-induced gentrification (TIG) it inevitably accelerates. The smiling, purple *ajolote* serves this exact purpose, providing an indigenous, eco-friendly veneer designed to mask rising land values, the displacement of working-class riders, and the splintering of the urban fabric.

One useful way to unpack the political forces driving these physical transformations is through Theresa Enright's critique of grand urbanism. In The Making of Grand Paris, Enright's (2023) critique of grand urbanism revealed that large-scale metropolitan transit and infrastructure projects are never politically neutral, technical solutions; rather, they serve as monumental assertions of state power explicitly designed to unify a highly fragmented, politically volatile metropolis under a single, overarching capitalist logic. In the context of Mexico City, the state channels this exact grand strategy by positioning mega-transportation systems, such as the rapid modernization of the *Tren Ligero* line extending into Xochimilco, as tools of metropolitan integration and territorial justice. By deploying massive infrastructural interventions, the Mexico City government attempts to stitch together a divided urban landscape, consolidating state authority and formatting the spatial economy to facilitate smooth wealth extraction by transnational corporate partners. Under the guise of ecological revitalization and civic pride, the state employs what Latin American urbanist Víctor Delgadillo (2014) terms *cosmética urbana*, i.e., a superficial, highly curated aesthetic intervention designed to project global modernity while masking socio-spatial segregation, to achieve this ideological unification. The pastel-purple *ajolotización* of the city's transit corridors, bridges, and retaining walls functions as a literal coat of paint over systemic infrastructural failure. Thus, by wrapping high-capacity transit lines and newly paved tourist corridors in the friendly, endemic imagery of Xochimilco, the government engineers a state of exception where critical discourse regarding gentrification, displacement, and ecological destruction is suspended in favor of nationalistic spectacle. In this sense, the state's aesthetic interventions function precisely as Enright conceptualizes: they are spectacular assertions of power that impose an illusion of democratic connectivity while actually hardwiring segregation into the urban fabric.

The contradiction of the unified, harmonious aesthetic narrative and the city's actual infrastructure then is one that points to an apparent fragmentation. Scholars have long pointed out the fragmenting spatial consequences of networked infrastructure development. Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin's (2001) foundational framework of splintering urbanism specifically addresses this dynamic, demonstrating how

infrastructural upgrades often deepen urban inequalities. Specifically, Graham and Marvin's account focuses on the fact that contemporary neoliberal governance systematically abandons the mid-century ideal of the integrated, universal city in favor of constructing optimized, decoupled infrastructure networks.

If we then go back to think of the World Cup preparations in Mexico City, the state's interventions manifest as "premium network spaces," meaning highly insulated, technologically advanced transport corridors engineered to channel international tourists, FIFA dignitaries, and affluent consumers between luxury nodes and the Estadio Azteca with frictionless speed. This creation of premium network spaces represents a clear manifestation of splintering urbanism that is intimately connected to the broader extractivist logic of mega-event.

This spatial polarization perfectly mirrors the dynamics observed during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, where state-led modernization projects generated premium mobility corridors that frequently bypassed marginalized favelas, thereby commodifying poverty while compounding social and financial debts (Levy, 2016). Meanwhile, the ordinary, non-spectacular everyday infrastructural networks relied upon by Mexico City's peripheral working class are left to further fracture, decay, and suffer from systemic disinvestment. This proves that *ajolotización* is a cosmetic cloak over a deeply splintered metropolitan geography. As John Lauermann (2019) notes, mega-event planners frequently exploit the ambiguity of the tournament to bring speculative, top-down infrastructural transformations under the legacy umbrella, bypassing democratic deliberation. Furthermore, such mega-event transformations violently reconfigure urban structures, prioritizing the festivalization of the city center while leaving the subsequent maintenance burden, and the socio-spatial displacement it triggers, to the local periphery.



Figure 3. *Tren Ligero* carriages fully wrapped in prominent axolotl iconography, serving as a highly visible manifestation of *cosmética urbana* along modernized transit corridors.

The Mobility Fix: Transit, Capital, and the Illusion of Connectivity

One of the most prominent canvases for this *cosmética urbana* is the city's mobility network, heavily prioritized because it physically stitches together the fragmented geographies required for the mega-event spectacle. As illustrated in Figure 3, the smiling *ajolote* cloaks transit spaces in an indigenous, eco-friendly veneer that functions to mask the splintering of the urban fabric. Mega-events like the World Cup demand a frictionless urban environment, ensuring the international spectator remains insulated as they are transported from the airport to their hotel, and onward

to the Estadio Azteca with seamless efficiency. To achieve this, the state has prioritized the expansion and modernization of specific transit arteries, most notably the *Tren Ligero* (Light Rail) line known as Xochimilco-Taxqueña. This specific line is crucial because it serves a dual function: it connects the ecological periphery of Xochimilco directly to the Estadio Azteca (which operates as a key stop on the line), while terminating at Taxqueña, a major metropolitan hub. Taxqueña links the southern bus terminal to the start of *Línea 2* of the Mexico City subway, a massive artery that runs along Tlalpan Avenue. *Línea 2* funnels tourists directly to major cultural destinations like Coyoacán (via the General Anaya station) and allows commuters to bypass the urban core entirely, terminating at Cuatro Caminos on the outskirts of the State of Mexico. Tellingly, *Línea 2* also received a major structural and aesthetic overhaul in time for the World Cup. As seen at the General Anaya station (Figure 4), transit hubs were upgraded with new pedestrian bridges crossing Tlalpan Avenue, modern fencing, and freshly painted, vibrant geometric facades. These physical renovations complement the indigenous designs and axolotl iconography deployed across other parts of the network, working together to project an image of a seamlessly modern, yet culturally grounded, metropolis.

One way to unpack the severe socio-economic fallout of this targeted transit investment is by focusing on the mechanics of Transit-Induced Gentrification (TIG), a process where public infrastructure upgrades disproportionately serve to price out local residents. Focusing on the fact that public investments in transit corridors do not benefit vulnerable populations equally, Neil Smith's (2005) foundational work on the rent gap demonstrates how these projects artificially elevate localized land values. They close the gap between current ground rent and potential capitalized land value to create prime real estate frontiers. In the Global South, as contemporary Latin American urbanists like Víctor Delgadillo (2014) have extensively showed, these speculative dynamics mean that upgrading transit corridors under a market-centric paradigm inevitably triggers skyrocketing land values, aggressive landlord speculation, and the eventual eviction and displacement of original lower-income residents. If we take this into consideration, then the expanded light rail line is less an instrument of peripheral mobility and more a predatory vanguard for real estate capital, driving out the very working-class populations it claims to serve.



Figure 4. The renovated exterior of the General Anaya subway station on *Línea 2*, demonstrating the physical deployment of *cosmética urbana*. The installation of upgraded pedestrian bridges, modern fencing, and vibrant facades serves to project a curated, modernized aesthetic for the impending influx of global tourists, diverting attention from deeper infrastructural disparities.

As Figure 5 illustrates, the municipal administration actively markets the newly branded "*Ajolotren*" not as a functional requirement for global sports capital, but as an explicit vehicle of "social justice." This illustrates how the state weaponizes progressive discourse to legitimize top-down infrastructure investments. The deployment of the axolotl motif across these transit hubs operates as an ideological shock absorber, visually neutralizing the predatory economics of gentrification with localized, folkloric charm. When a fleet of new *Tren Ligero* carriages is christened "*El Ajolote*" and adorned with cheerful amphibian iconography, the vehicle ceases to be a mere mechanism of transport; it becomes a rolling monument to the state's claimed commitment to the ecological south. However, viewed through Enright's (2023) critical lens regarding the true unifying purpose of grand infrastructure, it is possible to see that this mobility network represents a spatial fix for the impending logistical nightmare of the mega-event, one that provides the illusion of universal connectivity while actually hardwiring segregation into the urban fabric. In this context, the purple axolotl smiles at the commuter, effectively masking the violent, extractive logic of a transit system designed primarily to service the circulatory needs of FIFA and international capital.

This massive infrastructural spending, and the frantic speed at which it was implemented, must be contextualized within the predatory economics that systematically govern modern mega-events. International sporting spectacles operate primarily through the mechanisms of "celebration capitalism" (Boykoff, 2016). As Jules Boykoff outlines in his critique of global sporting festivals, this state-corporate arrangement uses the hyper-visible euphoria of a global event to manufacture public consent while simultaneously deploying the unyielding, inflexible deadlines of the tournament as an administrative weapon. The state leverages this manufactured urgency to establish an exceptional regime, pushing through controversial, highly privatized, and market-driven infrastructure projects. In the case of Mexico City's southern periphery, this manufactured urgency allows the state to bypass standard environmental impact assessments and eliminate meaningful democratic public oversight, a fatal administrative shortcut for an already dying wetland ecology like Xochimilco. The looming 2026 kickoff serves as an institutional cudgel, rationalizing the rapid transfer of public resources into private transit concessions under the banner of international prestige. Crucially, this administrative urgency to present a "finished" city to the global gaze directly necessitates the aesthetic erasure, or *fachadismo*, that characterizes the state's broader environmental policy, a dynamic that will be explored in the following section.



Figure 5. Official social media communication from the municipal administration introducing the "*Nuevo Ajolotren*." The framing of this multi-billion peso transit investment as a "permanent work of social justice" illustrates the discursive strategy of shielding mega-event infrastructure behind progressive vocabulary.

The Aesthetics of Erasure: Facadism and the Management of Crisis

In Latin American urban studies, the practice of *fachadismo* (facadism) refers to the state's tendency to invest heavily in the visible, superficial layers of the city while actively ignoring subterranean or structural rot. As scholars like Víctor Delgadillo (2014) have noted in their critiques of contemporary urban policy, this practice transforms heritage and local culture into a mere aesthetic shell, aggressively prioritizing the visual consumption of the city over the material well-being of its inhabitants. What is occurring in pre-World Cup Mexico City perfectly illustrates

this dynamic. The *ajolotización* of Mexico City is perhaps the most aggressive iteration of this phenomenon in the twenty-first century. By painting miles of concrete barriers and decaying pedestrian bridges with vibrant, folkloric murals, the state engages in a deliberate aestheticization of urban policy.

What this shows is that if transit provides the physical arteries for the World Cup, *cosmética urbana* provides its skin, a skin that effectively weaponizes visual beauty in order to forestall political dissent. Walter Benjamin (2008) famously noted, regarding the aestheticization of politics, that this is a strategy specifically designed to keep property relations untouched while offering citizens mere sensory spectacle. In such contexts, like World Cup Mexico City, the "spectacle" is not limited to visitors, but targets citizens as well, as it effectively transforms the very spaces where they live and politically participate. The state's branding campaign operates as a rigid policing of the sensory world, a dynamic Jacques Rancière (2004) labeled the "distribution of the sensible," as it dictates exactly what is permitted to be seen and recognized as politically legible within the metropolis.

By completely monopolizing the urban visual field with the cheerful, state-sanctioned caricature of the axolotl, the administration intentionally crowds out spaces for visual protest, erases alternative civic imaginaries, and visually smothers the counter-narratives of marginalized communities attempting to project their material grievances onto the public canvas. This forced aesthetic consensus operates as a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1991; Lapegna, 2017), which can be thought of as a process through which elite state and corporate actors impose a vision of the social world that naturalizes their dominance and invalidates grassroots grievances. Furthermore, this dynamic inflicts what Gediminas Lesutis (2024) terms "scenes of subjection" upon dispossessed populations. As Lesutis observes, extractivism frequently operates through the symbolic violence of promising "development" or a "better life" that is ultimately unrealizable for the marginalized. In the case of the *Ajolotren*, the state weaponizes this cruel optimism: it markets the aspiration of modern, frictionless connectivity to local residents, even though the actual material benefits of this infrastructure are perpetually deferred for them and strictly engineered for global consumers.

In pre-World Cup Mexico City, the state's branded simulation of Xochimilco has completely superseded the dying wetland environment. Jean Baudrillard (1981) famously conceptualized the simulacrum as a condition where the representation of reality becomes entirely unmoored from any physical referent, culminating in a hyperreality where "the map precedes the territory." Through this logic, the simulated axolotl circulating on the pristine tracks of the premium transit network

flourishes so successfully that the material extinction of the real biological organism becomes entirely irrelevant to the prestige of the global urban brand. This constitutes a severe socio-ecological paradox: as the state pours billions of pesos into the hyperreal, purple-branded simulation of the amphibian, the actual organism starves in the collapsing, polluted canals of the south.

The tragic irony of this *cosmética urbana*, therefore, is what it actively conceals. Behind the pastel murals of the amphibious god Xolotl lies the absolute degradation of Mexico City's water basin. The city is sinking, its aquifers are depleted, and the historical *chinampas* of Xochimilco, the actual, material home of the axolotl, are starved of clean water, replaced instead by treated sewage overflow. The cosmetic layer attempts to manage this ecological crisis not through remediation, but through representation. Surrounding citizens with pristine, two-dimensional images of a thriving ecology functions as a form of public gaslighting, substituting the material death of the lake bed with a vibrant, inescapable urban simulation. As Zambrano et al. (2020) note, without addressing the fundamental hydrological disconnects and structural neglect of the *chinampa* system, the axolotl faces imminent extinction. *Cosmética urbana* is not merely deceptive; it is a mechanism of ecological erasure, allowing the state to visually celebrate an ecosystem while simultaneously engineering its material death. This aggressive masking of reality necessitates the exact form of material, grassroots resistance that the *chinamperos* are currently mobilizing, a counter-narrative that will be explored in the following section.

Reclaiming Xolotl: Grassroots Resistance and the Eco-Territorial Turn

The production of abstract space and the enforcement of *cosmética urbana*, detailed in the previous sections, do not unfold across a passive geography. In pre-World Cup Mexico City, the state's totalizing campaign of *ajolotización* has transformed the southern lacustrine periphery into a primary frontline of socio-spatial struggle. Rather than quietly accepting the transformation of their endemic icon into an anesthetic corporate mascot for international spectators, the *chinamperos,* the traditional farmers who cultivate and preserve the chinampas, an ancient Mesoamerican system of artificial agricultural islands built upon the shallow lakebeds of Xochimilco, alongside indigenous communal landholders (*comuneros*) and grassroots environmental collectives, are actively mobilizing. Crucially, they are fighting to reclaim the land and the radical, mythic essence of Xolotl, the amphibious

Aztec god of duality and transformation from which the axolotl derives its name. In doing so, they transform the very infrastructure and the discourse around the mega-event into a highly contested terrain of political antagonism.

In stark contrast to the state's simulated, pastel graphics, Figure 6 captures one of the working canals of Xochimilco. This space functions as the contested hydrosocial territory where grassroots collectives are actively fighting state-led aestheticization. Recognizing the unique political opportunity presented by the looming tournament, these subaltern movements actively deploy a strategy of "piggybacking," a tactic observed by Levy and Sarmento (2020) where local communities utilize the hyper-visibility of global mega-events to broadcast their domestic grievances to an international audience. Because the municipal government is highly sensitive to international media narratives leading up to 2026, the *chinamperos* recognize that the axolotl branding is simultaneously the state's greatest public relations asset and its most vulnerable ideological flank.

The *Coordinación de Pueblos, Barrios Originarios y Colonias de Xochimilco* (Coordination of Indigenous Towns, Neighborhoods, and Colonies of Xochimilco) has consistently mobilized against the institutional co-optation of the amphibian. Responding to state-sponsored public relations events in the past, a struggle that clearly predates the World Cup timeline, the collective publicly condemned the administration for "folklorizing the axolotls for electoral purposes." They argued that utilizing the amphibian as a political prop without addressing the systemic pollution of the canals merely "condemns them to a painful and certain death" (Redacción SDP Noticias, 2022). Their critique exposes a fatal biological paradox in the state's planning: the government pours millions of pesos into painting the axolotl on the sides of the *Tren Ligero*, on the retaining walls that protect the rails, outside modernized subway stations, and even as welcoming decorations for international arrivals at the airport, which also received massive investment and renewal in preparation for the World Cup (as seen in Figure 7), while simultaneously extracting the groundwater required to keep the actual, living amphibian from going extinct in the wild. For the *chinamperos*, the cartoon mascot is not a harmless civic pride initiative; it is an active mechanism of erasure that gaslights the public while the real ecosystem perishes.



Figure 6. Traditional *trajineras* moored in one of the working canals of Xochimilco, representing the lived, material hydrosocial territory defended by grassroots collectives against top-down urban abstraction.

The resultant spatial contestation extends far beyond rhetorical critiques into direct, militant territorial defense. Their tactical repertoire includes organizing highway blockades along the southern arteries of the city, halting the construction of mega-event transit corridors, and confronting real estate developers attempting to encroach upon the wetland boundaries. In 2024, the Coordinación escalated their defense of

the hydrosocial territory to the international level by presenting their case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH). They formally denounced the state's construction of vehicular bridges over native wetlands, a project explicitly designed to speed up automotive circulation toward the Estadio Azteca (EDUCA Oaxaca, 2024). Among the many things this grassroots resistance exposes is the violent contradiction at the heart of *ajolotización*: the state simultaneously deploys the axolotl as a consumable brand of urban sustainability while systematically paving over the exact ecological wetlands required for its material survival.



Figure 7. World Cup-themed axolotl branding prominently displayed at the Mexico City International Airport. As the primary entry node for the mega-event, the airport received massive pre-tournament investment to service the circulatory demands of global capital. Here, the deployment of the localized mascot functions as the initial layer of *cosmética urbana*, immediately screening the exclusionary nature of this premium infrastructure for arriving international tourists.

To counter the state's progressive rhetoric, the grassroots mobilization in Xochimilco mounts a defense that aligns directly with scholars like David Harvey's (2008) radical, anti-capitalist formulation of spatial agency. In specific, for Harvey, the Right to the City is emphatically not a minor judicial claim to state-sanctioned resources or a mere right of access to existing urban systems; rather, it is a collective, democratic right to fundamentally reshape the entire process of urbanization itself by asserting control over the disposal of the macroeconomic surplus. When the independent collectives of the southern periphery organize to block transit construction and build autonomous networks of lacustrine defense, they reject the state's invitation to be passive consumers of a simulated, purple-branded environment. Instead, they re-center the Right to the City on its radical origins: a structural demand for collective self-determination over the metropolitan metabolism, prioritizing local human needs and ecological survival over the circulatory demands of transnational sports capital. By physically seizing construction sites and legally challenging mega-event infrastructure, the *chinamperos* are effectively demanding a cessation of the metabolic rift; they are asserting their democratic right to decide how the water and land of the valley are utilized, refusing to let their territory be formatted merely as a logistical corridor for FIFA.

This radical reclamation of spatial agency cannot be understood in isolation. This local resistance reflects a broader matrix of Latin American social mobilization, embodying what Maristella Svampa (2019) identifies as the "eco-territorial turn". Specifically, Svampa's account advances the argument that contemporary struggles in the Global South have shifted from traditional labor disputes to explicitly territorial conflicts, where indigenous and subaltern collectives organize around the defense of life, communal sovereignty, and common goods against the encroachment of global neo-extractivism. In the case of Mexico City, the state enacts a symbolic accumulation by dispossession, stripping the southern wetlands of their biological and cultural currency to construct a pristine, greenwashed facade. By physically defending their ancestral agro-ecological practices, the *chinamperos* expose the hollow hyperreality of the *Tren Ligero*'s axolotl. Effectively, what the *chinamperos* do is assert that the true, mythic essence of Xolotl, and its ecological survival, cannot be simulated on the pristine walls of a train carriage. Instead, through their daily defense of the canals and their rejection of top-down urban planning, their resistance demonstrates that this essence must be cultivated in the mud, water, and biocultural memory of the wetland. In doing so, they directly challenge the state's monopoly on

environmental representation and reclaim the right to author their own socio-ecological future.

Hydrosocial Territories and Autonomous Defense

It is important to note that the grassroots mobilization emerging from the ancient canals of Xochimilco should not be misconstrued as an isolated instance of localized, eco-defensive NIMBYism. Instead, this grassroots resistance is deeply embedded within a broader, radical lineage of Latin American territorial defense. The defense of Xochimilco is fundamentally a battle over what Thomas Perreault (2006) conceptualizes as "hydrosocial territories": dynamic spatial configurations where physical water flows, technological infrastructures, and political authority are intensely bound up with local identity, customary law, and popular protest. Just as the historic water and gas wars in Bolivia demonstrated that infrastructure is a primary site of political antagonism, the contemporary mobilization of *chinamperos* against the "*Ajolotren*" reveals a profound clash over resource hegemony. The entrepreneurial state envisions Xochimilco as a passive hydraulic and aesthetic reservoir to be drained for the maintenance of the gentrified urban core and the pageantry of the FIFA tournament. In direct opposition, local movements treat the territory as an active, self-governing entity whose ecological integrity is entirely non-negotiable.

The organizational grammar and tactical repertoire of this Mexican resistance directly mirror the autonomous urban structures analyzed in studies of El Alto, Bolivia (Lazar, 2006; Arbona, 2007). Both scholars highlight how peripheral communities, when confronted with predatory state policies, reject traditional institutional mediation and instead construct alternative spheres of political authority, such as neighborhood associations (*juntas vecinales*), traditional syndicates, and micro-local assemblies, to enact radical ruptures in the fabric of neoliberal governance. In Xochimilco, the organic orchestration of highway blockades, independent environmental monitoring, and community-led *chinampa* restoration projects functions through an identical logic of subaltern autonomy. Because these grassroots networks operate completely outside the co-opted, institutional frameworks of *cosmética urbana*, they refuse to merely petition for minor adjustments to the state's purple-branded infrastructure. Instead, they enact a radical territorial defense that asserts direct sovereignty over their own ecology, presenting a clear collective challenge to the state-of-exception governance undergirding the impending mega-event spectacle.

The Sinking City: Spatial Justice and Decolonial Ecology

The spatial struggles unfolding across the lacustrine periphery of Mexico City ultimately force a critical confrontation with the normative horizons of urban planning and political ecology. When the state deploys *cosmética urbana* to mask infrastructure-led dispossession, it does not merely engage in an aesthetic exercise; it actively frames an administrative definition of urban fairness. The Brugada administration's presentation of the *Tren Ligero* "*El Ajolote*" as an instrument of ecological modernization and peripheral inclusion attempts to fulfill a highly visible, institutional checklist of urban equity. However, when the material reality of the southern periphery is evaluated, where a sinking lacustrine basin is systematically drained to insulate a speculative urban core, the profound limitations of liberal planning paradigms become starkly apparent.

One way to untangle the ideological deception embedded within the state's transit interventions is by focusing on the tension between liberal and radical conceptualizations of the Just City. On the surface, the state might argue that expanding the *Tren Ligero* to the working-class south objectively improves transit access, offering a distributional equity of mobility. However, as Harvey (1993) argues, liberal planning paradigms are fundamentally incapable of producing genuine spatial justice because they treat urban problems as isolated, distributive anomalies to be solved through technocratic reconfigurations or aesthetic consensus. For Harvey, true spatial justice can never be achieved by merely tinkering with the geography of distribution while leaving the underlying capitalist mode of production and its speculative land markets untouched. As such, the purple-branded transit lines offer mere infrastructural consumption, denying the *chinamperos* the structural power to halt the extraction of their hydrosocial territory or reshape the metabolic flows of the megalopolis. The lilac and deep purple transit lines running toward Xochimilco function within a political economy that simultaneously drives transit-induced gentrification, accentuates the rent gap, and fuels real estate speculation. By superimposing a cheerful, state-sanctioned icon over a fracturing metropolitan landscape, *cosmética urbana* substitutes radical spatial justice with a shallow, consumable simulation of equity that leaves the baseline dynamics of capital accumulation completely intact.

If the current trajectory of mega-event urbanism holds, the 2026 World Cup will undoubtedly be hailed as a logistical and aesthetic triumph. But beneath the purple banners, the water table will continue to fall. Unless the concept of territorial justice

is materially reclaimed by those who live and labor in the periphery, the smiling, cartoon axolotl that blankets Mexico City will cease to be a symbol of ecological resilience. Instead, it will stand as the ultimate monument to an eco-cide: a vibrant, colorful tombstone for a sinking city.

Dismantling the hydraulic violence inflicted upon Xochimilco thus requires moving beyond Western, eco-neoliberal paradigms of sustainable development. The *chinamperos'* territorial defense aligns instead with the Latin American decolonial framework of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living). As Eduardo Gudynas (2011) articulates, *Buen Vivir* demands a radical ontological shift that recognizes nature, and specifically the wetland ecology, not as a passive stockpile of resources, nor as a hyperreal aesthetic backdrop for urban branding, but as an active subject of rights. For the *chinamperos*, asserting territorial sovereignty is therefore a decolonial imperative. It is a rejection of the World Cup's state of exception and a declaration that the true survival of the *ajolote* relies not on the *cosmética urbana* of the state, but on the restoration of the lived, ancestral hydrosocial territory. True territorial justice in Mexico City cannot be achieved through the cosmetic benevolence of the entrepreneurial state. Resisting the spectacle of the 2026 World Cup requires a radical decolonial ecology: a political alignment that refuses to separate the defense of the earth from the emancipation of its peripheral inhabitants. Only by dismantling the colonial urban structures that treat Xochimilco as a site of physical and symbolic extraction can the open veins of the lacustrine basin begin to heal, transforming the axolotl from a corporate mascot of a sinking metropolis back into a living testament of autonomous territorial sovereignty.

Conclusion

This article has investigated the socio-spatial paradox of *ajolotización*, demonstrating that the omnipresent, state-sanctioned deployment of the endangered axolotl across the metropolitan transit network is not a neutral celebration of ecological heritage or an innocent exercise in civic branding. Instead, it operates as a sophisticated mechanism of symbolic extractivism. By mining, flattening, and commodifying the cultural and biological currency of the southern lacustrine periphery, the entrepreneurial state constructs an aesthetic shield. This regime of *cosmética urbana* is explicitly engineered to greenwash top-down, market-driven infrastructure investments, absorb the logistical shocks of celebration capitalism, and insulate transnational sports capital from grassroots critique.

However, as the mobilizations of the *chinamperos* and local collectives demonstrate, the state's production of abstract space is actively contested. Utilizing the hyper-visibility of the mega-event to "piggyback" their domestic grievances onto a global stage, local resistance movements actively challenge the state's institutionalized co-optation of progressive spatial rhetoric. They achieve this by treating Xochimilco as a deeply contested hydrosocial territory and organizing through autonomous neighborhood networks. By demanding material sovereignty over their wetlands, they reclaim the mythic, radical essence of Xolotl, refusing to allow their living ecology to be converted into a corporate mascot for a global spectacle. Their struggle embodies the eco-territorial turn, re-centering the Right to the City on material survival, autonomous self-governance, and a rejection of the metabolic rift driven by global capital insertion.

On a broader theoretical horizon, this article responds directly to the "Southern turn" in contemporary urban studies. The case of World Cup Mexico City illustrates that Southern megacities are not merely passive recipients of Western planning models; rather, they are actively pioneering highly sophisticated, deeply regularized models of aestheticized, neo-extractivist governance. In these configurations, the state cannibalizes its own ecological crises, processing literal extinction into a spectacular commodity to secure its standing in the global market. To challenge this trajectory, urban theorists and planners must look beyond liberal, technocratic illusions of distributive equity and embrace a radical spatial justice grounded in a decolonial ecology, such as *Buen Vivir*. True territorial justice requires a fundamental dismantling of the colonial spatial hierarchies that treat peripheral ecosystems as sacrifice horizons. Only when the defense of the earth is structurally reunited with the political emancipation of its subaltern inhabitants can the axolotl be liberated from its purple-branded corporate shroud, transforming back into a living testament of ecological resilience and autonomous territorial sovereignty.

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