



Palacio de Bellas Artes

## **MEXICO CITY**

I have recently returned from my visit to Mexico City. Thank you to LUTSF and the British Council Mexico team for all of their support. I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity for such an immersive and fascinating adventure in this incredible city.

I travelled to Mexico City aiming to spend time learning about dance and cultural projects and to witness how arts and culture was being harnessed by the Government and NGOs to build social resilience and stronger communities. I wanted to test and nourish my ambition for what dance can do for closer, more connected communities and what new global conversations might offer to new perspectives on being a resilient citizen with a creative voice.

I was curious about how the challenges of making and sharing dance in a large rural county like Devon might be informed by radically different geographical challenges in a big city. I wondered whether some of the solutions to mass population connections and communication might also be relevant in a rural community. With a population 8 times that of Devon at nearly 9 million and its wider area much larger at 21.2 million people, Mexico City is the most populous metropolitan area in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>1</sup>

I connected with the British Council in Mexico City to have conversations with strategic leads for culture in the city on a local level and within a UK perspective. I was invited by Maria Garcia Holley, Head of Arts, to spend time with staff to exchange information about our work and to talk about some of their current challenges. I was also keen to challenge myself by developing more rigour around my dance writing and by reaching out to new trans-disciplinary aspects of my work. I wanted to invite conversations with academics and dynamic thinkers in other disciplines to stretch my thinking at the intersections with my practice.

## **MY ADVENTURE**

I arrived at Mexico City's principle airport on a busy Friday evening. I had planned to land at a reasonable time and I had carefully arranged to be picked up by my hotel. With no Spanish or mobile phone signal, as I walked slowly through the arrivals hall I felt the exhilaration of anonymity and the charged thrill of my first challenge of getting out of the airport and to my bed for the night.

My accommodation was in one of the laid back, arty quarters (thanks to my contact in the city for the heads up). I began to let go of some of my travel anxieties and get a feel for the place. I spent some time exploring the historic centre of the city and learning about the cultural history. The National Museum of Anthropology was an incredible introduction to some of the histories of the Mexican people: the scale of the architecture itself prefacing the vast catalogue of artefacts and histories within.

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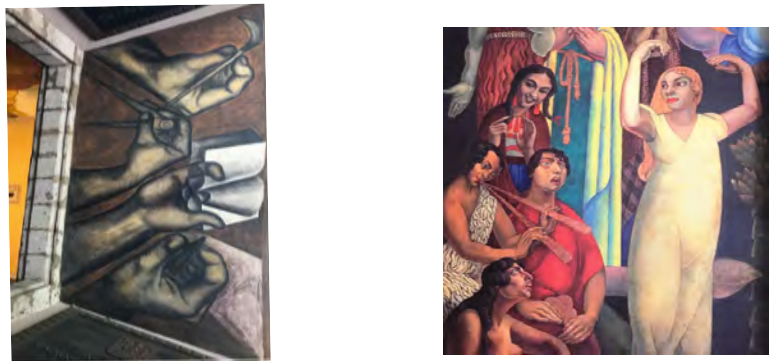
<sup>1</sup> <http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/mexico-city-population/>

The city is noisy and lush, popping with colourful murals: streets busy with people eating, talking, buying and selling. I know I only witnessed a small part of the city experience and was directed to many of the city's beautiful green spaces and important cultural destinations but I was bowled over by the energy and warmth of the streets. Mexico City is one of extremes: impossibly thick traffic congestion and quiet, leafy back streets, buckets of fried insects and vegan delis, histories of oppression and the painful beauty of protest art.



City streets and mural at UNAM

I went on a walking tour led by a young anthropology student at the city university. Her account was a funny, sad, entertaining but ultimately shocking brief history of the historical centre. I was unprepared for the devastating history of the Mexican people: the persecution and suffering of generations of indigenous peoples and the cruelties of multiple occupations. I felt the intensity of the forces of contrast and contradiction, stress and vigour, violence, passion, pain. A slow walk around the Secretaría de Educación Pública with three floors of Diego Rivera's murals around a central leafy courtyard was breathtakingly beautiful. The size of Rivera's murals and their painstaking detail are overwhelming and the depictions of indigenous people and day to day activities are side by side with images of violence and loss. He depicts scenes of conflicts, rebellions, and revolution: scenes of hatred and war.



Murals at Secretaría de Educación Pública

The combination of the formal history I was learning and the dialogue with cultural leaders about the contemporary challenges faced by communities in the city today including the political uncertainty precipitated by a recent change of government gave me an accelerated and rich lesson in some of the challenges they were facing.

I wanted to experience contrast of scale between Devon and Mexico City. It almost knocked me over.



Ancient Ruins, Templo Mayor, Mexico City

As well as meeting and talking to the British Council Arts team I was able to connect with a number of other thinkers and change-makers;

- I visited Mexico University (UNAM), site of the 1968 Summer Olympics and home to some incredible architecture (Unesco World Heritage Site). I learned that the university was a separate legal and administrative jurisdiction from the city: with its own police force, governance etc. This had allowed more tolerant and stable society to proliferate amongst the student populations with LGBT+ communities flourishing for example and young families visiting to spend time in the more relaxed and liberal environment. The university site was buzzing with arts and creative activities at weekends and public holidays. Attending university is free for citizens of Mexico City with access to the state of the art concert halls and theatre venues also available at no charge to students. The performance facilities are jaw-dropping.
- At the university I met up with two academics working in inclusive arts practice. Patricia Brogna is an academic and poet. She works at the Centre of Sociological Studies, UNAM. Patricia's research is in the field of sociological theory and social policy: human rights, social exclusion and disability. The conversation with Patricia and one of her PhD students was a fascinating insight into some of the challenges around developing a dance practice with disabled people in Mexico outside of a therapeutic context.
- I was also introduced to Beatriz Miranda and Benjamín Mayer Foulkes of *17 estudios críticos*, an arts organisation working determinedly to create new opportunities for disabled artists across Mexico. We had in depth discussions about how they were trying to work in new ways that respected the individual voices and contexts of the disabled artists and at the same time supported them to claim new platforms for their work and to reach new audiences. It was interesting to discuss ideas about power and control within the arts sector and how social change could be affected if the right partners are on board at the right time.
- I feel privileged to have been invited to visit British/Mexican artist Leonora Carrington's former family home as part of my trip, tagging along with a British Council team to a sneak preview of a 2 year restoration project of the building. The team leading the project were on secondment from the university and after a detailed guided tour they discussed how the house and its contents might best be presented for the public to showcase and reveal the artist's life and work. The extended conversations included how the house and its contents might be curated and presented in a way that honoured the artist's life and work and encouraged local audiences to be engaged with this aspect of their heritage.

## **WRANGLES WITH SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ART**

My learning and the experiences I was having were through the lens of 'socially-engaged art'. One of my motivations for my trip was to consider approaches to socially engaged arts and culture in our different locations.

Art and social change is very much on the mind of many arts and cultural organisations in the UK. We have become well-practised in articulating our work in terms of its social and health impact. My trip, perhaps within the context of some extreme poverty and inequality prompted me to question some of the privileges we are afforded in the UK even to be considering culture as an 'intervention' rather than as embodied, expressions of identity – with the power to precipitate change rather than react to provocation. The art and culture I

had seen in Mexico City was proudly offered, often appropriated: with a close history of being stolen and exploited.

Faced with some of the realities of this context I found it difficult to correlate my UK experience of socially-engaged art, which has a tendency towards 'applying' art to carry out a particular social or economic agenda, with the preference here to focus on the creative economy and expressions of cultural identity amid disruptive political uncertainty. Within art and cultural discourse between my own professional networks, we frequently refer to 'improving' health and wellbeing and supporting 'stronger' communities which simultaneously excludes artists from these communities and instrumentalises their practices as tools of urban and rural renewal. As artists and practitioners how do we need to flex our own ethical muscle to avoid inviting town planners, corporate social responsibility agents and commissioners to use us to deliver their agendas?

When up close to extreme inequality and poverty, the bloody history of invasion and the violence of successive occupation, thinking about 'socially-engaged art' feels difficult and I am prompted (forced?) to open up new ways of thinking about artists as mouthpieces of the communities in which they live and work, potent agents of change rather than tools of policy makers or corporate ideologies that ultimately aim to retain structures of oppression and power.

I am interested in social change expressed through art and culture but this experience in Mexico City continues to challenge me to rethink the power dynamics of this relationship and how local communities motivate and inspire each other through their art and culture and ultimately affect the changes they want to see. Facilitating 'everyday' creativity allows us to explore and realise incremental, cumulative or accelerated change. I have made a profound shift in the way I am thinking about the nomenclature (and ultimately the nature) of 'socially-engaged' arts practices. Dance practices can and do instigate energetic new relationships and dialogue and this can be momentum for personal and relational change. Recognising my own privilege within these relationships can support creative processes that have the potential to reveal and unlock new perspectives and help to find voice for the needs and desires of others in my communities who may have experienced art and culture being separated from their everyday lives through inequality, oppression or lack of access to resources: then having it done back to them by 'artists'.

I have had an opportunity to listen to new perspectives on how artists might, within the vigour of their own communities and with the privileges and opportunities their skills afford, lay the foundations for change. I am confident that dance can support us to empower ourselves, to relate positively with others and to communicate our views. This in turn can fortify the bonds between communities, institutions and individuals, which helps to tackle inequality and isolation and strengthen local relationships. My learning is profound and I deeply appreciate having the opportunity to be surprised by the direction it has taken!

**WITH MANY THANKS TO LUTSF AND BRITISH COUNCIL MEXICO, PATRICIA BROGNA AND UNAM, 17 ESTUDIOS CRÍTICOS AND MEXICO CITY.**



Sue Smith at Frida Khalo museum, Mexico City.  
All photos: Sue Smith