

*STUDYING HOUSING AREAS IN A DEVELOPING NATION: LESSONS FROM OAXACA CITY, MEXICO.*

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*ABSTRACT*

*This paper explores the usefulness of drawing on conceptual models in archaeology and units of analysis from architecture, urban planning and urban sociology when conducting a socio-economic study of a moderate-sized city in a developing country. The concept of the social area is useful in helping to mesh statistical data with ethnographic open-interview methodology. The example presented in this paper is from the work of the Mexican Urban Household Project's work in Oaxaca, Mexico.*

*INTRODUCTION*

There are two main streams of thinking about the concept 'urban' in anthropology. The first stream is linked to Childe (1952) and Adams (1966). They view the city as manifestation of social and economic processes which, at various points in time, produce dense human settlements. Urban centers have specific functions in a wider "complex" society, making them important units in the study of evolving complex human systems (Collins, 1980; Fox, 1977; Rollwagen, 1979; Timberlake, 1985). In anthropology, this approach is called the study of "contemporary complex society" (Eames and Goode, 1977).

The second stream is the microlevel study of traditional social anthropology, "anthropology in the city" (Eames and Goode, 1977). Local-level studies in urban areas generally investigate an individual, a well-defined subpopulation, a set of networks, or a problem such as migration or drug abuse. In local-level studies, the urban setting forms a backdrop for understanding these human institutions (Bott, 1957; Brown, 1977; Graves and Graves, 1974; Hendricks and Murphy, 1981; Lomnitz, 1977; Merry, 1981).

The two approaches are analogous to the micro/macro dichotomy in general use in the social sciences. Macrolevel studies offer an aggregate view of the urban setting and the place a city occupies in the wider system. The macrolevel studies, however, tend to miss the details of daily urban life offered by microlevel studies. The question for anthropology and social science is how to link these two approaches to provide a more complete picture of how the city is affected by its inhabitants and the complex system in which it is imbedded. One problem is finding appropriate units of analysis

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between the global level (Jacobs, 1984; Wallerstein, 1974; Wolf, 1982) and the microlevel of anthropology (Lewis, 1961; Liebow, 1967; Peattie, 1972). In seeking a solution, one can look to archaeology for a model of how to investigate a city's internal complexity, rather than investigating individuals in the city or looking at the city as a node in a wider network.

In the tradition of Millon (1973) at Teotihuacan and Blanton (1978) at Monte Alban, one can search for the significant units in the constructed environment--the city. One can then interpret the distribution of those units as a reflection of the relationship between the city in a system and the social organization of its residents. Homes and their spacing in neighborhoods offer such a unit. Homes are the locus of activity of the "minimal social unit above the individual--the household (Hammel, 1984). As such, the spacing of homes over the urban landscape is not a random process. It is the physical manifestation of the interaction of culture with economy and environment. Spacing can provide the researcher with the needed link between the macro and microlevels of current urban studies.

*RESIDENTIAL UNITS AND NEIGHBORHOODS AS THE FOCUS OF  
INVESTIGATION*

The dwelling unit is a complex phenomenon long recognized in geography, home economics, sociology, anthropology and urban planning. While all cultures provide some form of shelter for their members, housing is more than a place to seek protection from the sun or rain and to keep one's belongings (Morris and Winter, 1978; Rapoport, 1982). It is the location of a significant portion of a society's cultural and symbolic interaction (Bourdieu, 1973; Gregor, 1977; Hallowel, 1967). The dwelling unit is where much of an individual's socialization occurs (Morris and Winter, 1978). It is where cultures reinforce sexual division of labor and conduct. As such, the built environment is tied to important socio-cultural aspects of society and is an important symbolic element in the interaction among humans (Hammel and Laslett, 1974; Rodman, 1985).

The symbolic aspect of housing makes it intriguing for social science inquiry. Symbols are never randomly distributed in a society. They are used by a culture to make statements about itself, its relationship to the natural world, and about the relationship between individuals and groups. Just as the matrilineal clustering of households in London and of *wikiups* among the Apache reflect strong matrilineal ties in those societies, the clustering of households with respect to income and class in the United States is a reflection of a major force in the social organization of that country. The tendency to sort symbols geographically into meaningful categories creates the "social areas" of cities (Santos, 1979).

It is common to equate the social area, a more or less homogenous region in the city, with what in the United States is called a "neighborhood". However, neighborhood and social area are two different concepts. *Neighborhood* is generally invoked by urban residents to imply that a portion of rural life still lives in the city. One knows the people in the neighborhood and these neighbors provide a certain degree of the social support believed to exist in rural villages or hamlets. Neighborhoods are recognized by their residents and have meaning for them as points of social and cultural identification even though they may not meet the ideal of a physical space in which everyone is "neighborly" (Keller, 1968; Merry, 1981).

*Social area*, or locality, is a concept referring to a region within identifiable physical boundaries where the residents' observable level of well-being is relatively homogenous. What defines a locality is not necessarily a name given it by the residents, but common history, common social class of residents and a common relationship to the wider urban and national system. Households, which are significant units of social interaction and adaptation, tend to cluster with other units that have made similar adjustments to the urban setting. This tendency allows the researcher to combine statistical rigor with sound ethnographic methods to gain a clear picture of the complexity of the urban system.

#### THE OAXACA URBAN HOUSEHOLD STUDY

The method used in the Oaxaca urban study contains two phases. The first phase is a study of the general urban context. It includes identification of social areas in the city and ethnographic research in a sample of each type identified. The second phase is the administration of a socio-economic questionnaire to a sample of the population. This makes it possible to bring together the physical/social environment described in the first phase with pertinent household-level socio-economic data that can be analyzed in a statistically valid manner (Baldwin, 1974).

##### *Phase I*

Initially, available information is used to develop a general picture of the city. Information is gathered from governmental agencies and from "qualified informants", such as local social scientists and politicians who have knowledge of the city and its environs. The data are used, along with the personal observations of the project staff, to divide the urban area into "localities" or, according to Caminos, Turner and Steffian (1969):

relatively self-contained residential area(s) within an urban center. In general, (a locality) is contained within physical boundaries that are of two types: barriers and meshing boundaries. Mountains, water, limited-access highways and sharp changes in land use are considered barriers. Main streets and political, or municipal, divisions are considered meshing boundaries (p. x).

Two-person teams consisting of an architect or engineer and a social scientist made checks for homogeneity within each locality by walking every street and talking with local leaders. If a locality is found to contain significant regions differing with respect to tenure, housing styles, age of settlement, and/or the general level of living of the population, it is divided up into the appropriate number of homogenous units. Each new locality is noted on a map. In Oaxaca, 116 localities were identified. They corresponded almost exactly with the political divisions--the *colonias*, or neighborhoods--of the city. These localities, or *colonias*, became the largest sampling unit in the study.

With a map showing the position of each locality in the city, the survey team chose the "most typical" block in each colonia. The team drew a detailed map of the block. One or two typical houses in the block were measured and a plan was drawn with notations as to construction type, services available, age, and general condition of the dwelling. While the architect was measuring the dwelling and gathering physical data on the lot, the social scientist carried out an in-depth, directed interview with an adult member of the household. These interviews covered major aspects of the family's history and the history of the

neighborhood. The team measured the living quarters and gathered cultural data from over 100 households. They conducted in-depth open interviews with over 170 households.

A good general picture of the city with respect to its climate, history, economic structure, demography and spatial distribution of its population was obtained. In addition to providing data for a general description of Oaxaca, the first phase of the study allowed the research team to develop a typology of social areas into which each of the city's colonias could be placed.

Systems of land use and housing for a particular city or region must be ethnographically as well as empirically valid. In Oaxaca, the research team wanted the classification of living spaces in the city to reflect the complex relationship between tenure, type of housing, and welfare of the population. The research team looked at indices of education level, migration, the degree of intracolonia social cohesion (as reflected in the number and types of local organizations and whether the colonia used a communal labor system for the development of local infrastructure), the attitudes of the residents toward political and economic development and the general morale of the colonia. The combination of these physical, legal, economic and social variables led to the defining of six major types of living spaces in Oaxaca: 1) invasions, 2) *colonias populares*, 3) site-and-service projects, 4) *pueblos conurbados*, 5) the center city, and 6) middle-class housing. They are briefly described below.

#### *Neighborhood Types*

*Invasions* (INV). Settlements recently established on invaded land are not a significant type of living system in present-day Oaxaca, although invasions have played a role in the development of the city. The area presently occupied by invasions is about 1 percent of the city's total area. Except for one group near the old zoo, invaders hold land of marginal value. The diagnostic feature for this system is that, having recently invaded the land, residents face the possibility of being removed by the civil authorities. Tenure is irregular. There is little permanent housing and almost all residents are extremely poor.

*Colonias Populares* (VCP, PCP, MICP). Generally, these are older, illegal settlements that have either been legalized by the government or are in the process of legalization. They comprise over 50 percent of the land in the city of Oaxaca and hold a major portion of the population. Because of their predominance and heterogeneity as a group, they are divided into three groups based on the incomes reported during the Phase I block interviews: 1) very poor *colonias populares* (VPCP) are those in which reported incomes for the household head is less than the federally-established minimum wage of \$81 per month; 2) In poor *colonias populares* (PCP), household heads report incomes between \$81 and \$162 per month; 3) In the moderate-income colonias (MICP), household heads report incomes of over \$162 per month. (For ease of comprehension, all money figures are given in rounded 1980 United States dollars. The conversion figure used is .044. Multiplying the dollar figure by 22.34 will convert the dollar amount to Mexican pesos) The quality of life in the *colonias populares* increases as one moves up the scale, though this is not always the case. In some instances, poorer colonias, because of their internal organization and cohesiveness, are able to generate infrastructure not available in wealthier areas. This is especially true if the poor colonia has been in existence for a longer period of time.

*Pueblos Conurbados* (PC). These neighborhoods are distinguished from the rest of the city by their unique historical and political relationship. They are older independent communities that have, over the years, become either bedroom

communities for the center or colonias directly under the political control of the city government. In general, while the incomes in these regions are not as high as in other parts of the city, there exists a great deal of community spirit which translates into higher levels of community services for the population. In addition, the homes have been around longer. The process of autoconstruction, in which poor households may build a good, permanent dwelling through long-term investment, has produced a number of substantial homes. *Pueblos conurbados* comprise approximately 11 percent of the area of the *municipio* of Oaxaca.

*Site-and-Service Projects* (SSP). These living sites are a special category distinguished by the nature of their development rather than by an economic measure or land tenure. On most variables, the residents of sites-and-services projects fall within the range of variation found in the *colonias populares*. What makes these localities unique is the government's commitment to provide them with basic construction aid (Stepick and Murphy, 1980). Such colonias occupy eight percent of the urban area of the city.

*The Centro* (CENT). The oldest portion of the city is the central area. It is designated as one living space despite its heterogeneity. This is done primarily because of the general agreement among the city's residents that the *centro* defines a single spatial unit. The physical boundaries of this region coincide more or less with the 1940 boundaries of the city. As the area in which state and federal governments have focused their attention, it is known as a place where services are available. Social integration in the *centro*, despite its relatively small size (20 percent of the city), is low. It is, however, the center of action for the entire state. For that reason, it is a favored living location.

*Middle-Class Housing* (MCH). Except for their more modern housing, the city's middle-class areas have many of the characteristics of the moderate-income *colonias populares* and site-and-service projects. There are two basic types of middle-class housing: governmental mass-housing projects and private subdivisions. In the government housing projects, large numbers of detached and semi-detached homes are built for the middle- and upper-level salaried employees of Mexico. The private subdivisions, or *fraccionamientos*, range from entire groups of homes being offered for sale by the developer to vacant lots with services. In all cases, middle-class housing can be recognized by the regularity of layout and modernity of construction. Social cohesion within these enclaves tends to be low because the conditions of the colonias generally do not require residents to engage in collective action to improve their situation. Middle-class housing areas occupy almost ten percent of the city's areas.

In Phase I of the Oaxaca project, social scientists gathered open-ended interview data from a sample of households in every neighborhood in the city. Those data, along with the physical data collected by the engineers and architects, provides a comprehensive idea of what the city of Oaxaca is like. The city's growth was reviewed with local historians and politicians. All relevant government agencies were consulted concerning levels of services and general living conditions.

#### *Phase II*

The stratification of the city for the purposes of administering the survey questionnaire relies on the data from the first phase of the study. In Phase II, a representative sample of each type of social area identified in Phase I was selected. The result is a sample of 52 different areas of the city ranging from the poorest sections in the most recent invasions to the wealthiest new developments in San Felipe de Agua. By the end of Phase II, almost five percent

of all the households had been interviewed. The nature of the sample, along with knowledge of the city's physical structure, its history and the plans its leaders have for the future, means a comprehensive study of the internal structure of the city can be developed.

#### THE NEIGHBORHOODS OF OAXACA

The most important event in the lives of most Oaxaca householders is the acquisition of a secure home site. The degree of security is arguable--home sites are political footballs. A legalized site and legal ownership of one's home is an important step toward realization of a tolerable life. Once that is secured, households seldom move.

When a colonia is young, the inhabitants are very energetic and politically active. They must acquire regular title to their land and force the city to recognize them (Butterworth, 1973). The more recent the colonia, the more reticent the city. The older the colonia, the greater is its political clout and the more difficult it is for the city to withstand the demands of that colonia. Similarly, the older the colonia, the older its inhabitants, the further advanced they are in the domestic cycle, the greater their ability to invest money in their housing, the better the conditions of the houses in the colonia and the better off the households. Processes of improvement can be seen in the following sections.

#### *Economic Conditions*

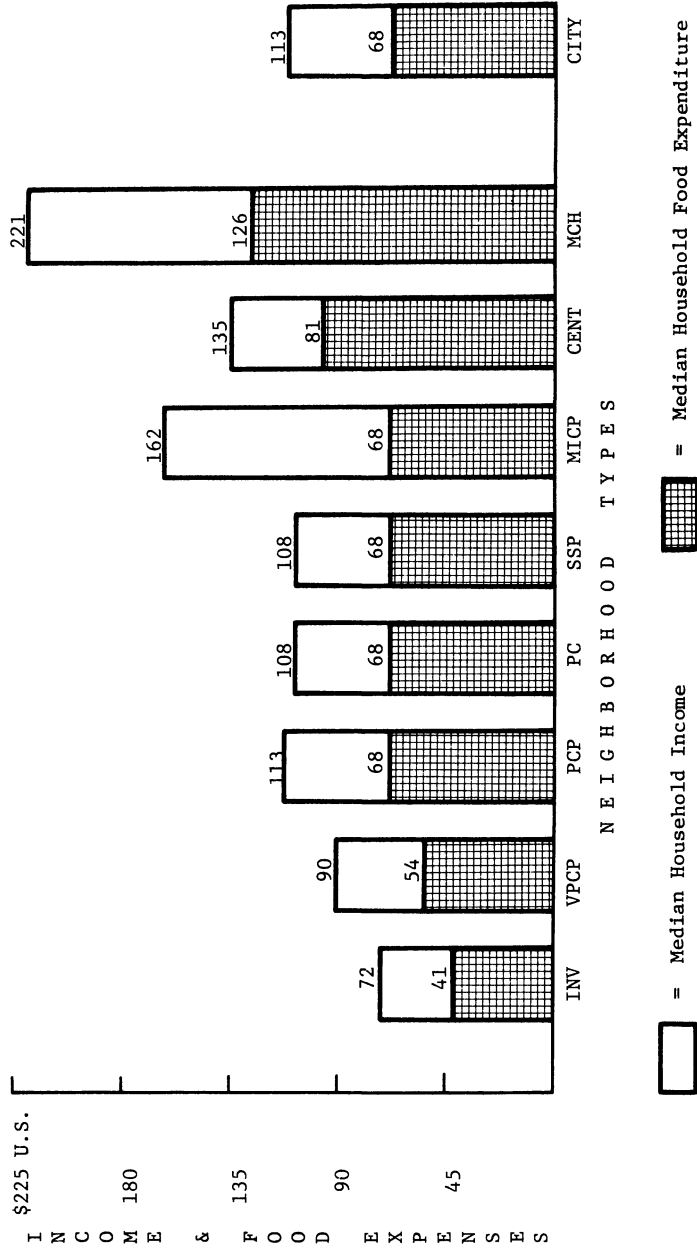
A gross measure of the economic well-being of households in the different living systems of Oaxaca can be seen in the median total monthly-income levels for households, especially as these compare with median expenditures for food (see Figure 1). (The ordering of the localities along the X-axis of Figures 1-7 is based on an assessment of desirability as a location of residence). Median food expenditures level off at \$68 per month, with only two colonia types exceeding this amount. There is no reason to believe the \$68-per-month food figure will provide a household with a nutritionally-balanced and adequate diet. With this amount per month for food, however, people will not go hungry and households then seem willing to divert money to other needs (Lorenzen, 1986).

In the gross household-income figure, there is a general rise as one moves from the invasions to the middle-class housing sections of the city. The rise is not entirely consistent because of the time variable. A major factor in the classification of a social area is the general physical well-being of the neighborhood and the availability of infrastructural services. In the category *colonia popular*, where most households reside, time is one of the most important factors in determining the conditions of the neighborhood (Mangin, 1967; Nolasco and Bazant, 1979).

Because it does not overestimate the cost of children, a better measure of household economic well-being is the per-adult-equivalent income, presented in Figure 2 along with household size in per-adult-equivalent figures. Using Kuznets' (1976) argument that the data do not warrant a finer distinction, the number of adult-equivalent units in a household is calculated by counting each child under the age of 15 as one-half an adult. Age 15 is chosen as the beginning of adulthood because that is the age when major decisions concerning the child's future education or labor participation are made in Mexican households. The per-adult-equivalent income is calculated by dividing the household's total income by the number of adult-equivalent units. Using this measure, income levels show a decided rise from the poorest to the most well-to-do colonias. In the *pueblos conurbados* (PC) and the site-and-service projects (SSP), however, the conditions

FIGURE ONE

MEDIAN MONTHLY HOUSEHOLD INCOMES AND FOOD EXPENDITURES FOR EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE AND FOR THE CITY AS A WHOLE



= Median Household Income  
 = Median Household Food Expenditure

are better than income levels would suggest. By the per-adult income measure, the center city (CENT) households are getting along considerably better than those in the moderate-income (MIH) colonias, despite what the gross figures indicate. These figures seem to indicate that an adequate level of living in the center city requires a degree of control over household size.

#### *Household Competition*

Household and family structures are associated with neighborhood types as well, but in a more complex way. Demographic and domestic strategies play a key role in the economic and social betterment of the household (Hackenbush, Murphy, and Selby, 1984; Murphy and Selby, 1979). Households develop differently in different neighborhoods. (see Figure 3). The presence of female heads and extended members in the household seems closely tied with the age of the settlement of the various colonia types. The newest living systems--invasions (INV), sites-and-service projects (SSP) and middle-class housing (MCH) projects--are those with the fewest female heads of household. For numerous cultural and structural reasons, women are less able to participate as partners in such organized and male-dominated activities as the invasion of land. Similarly, there are roadblocks to their taking advantage of government-subsidized housing opportunities.

Female-headed households are most prevalent in the long-established neighborhoods. The presence of extended households in neighborhoods follows a similar pattern. Households with non-nuclear family members are more common in better-established communities. This is partly a reflection of the natural life cycle. More mature households are more likely to be in a position where they feel either compelled to include an additional member or have the opportunity to do so.

Figure 4 presents data on the number of workers and nonworkers in the household and worker-dependency ratios found in the the different colonia types. The number of workers per household varies little across colonias. The mean is slightly higher-than-average in the invasions (INV) and *pueblos conurbados* (PC), where large household size provides the domestic unit with more workers. In contrast, the middle-class (MCH) colonias also have many members. They are, however, children being kept in school. The number of workers in the household is, therefore, no higher than the citywide mean. The moderate-income *colonias populares* (MICP) and the center city (CENT) have slightly more workers as a result of their greater proportions of households with working children. With little variation in the number of workers in households, the different worker-dependency ratios for the colonia types are primarily a reflection of the number of nonworkers present in the households. The center city, where crowding is a problem, is unique among the living systems in its reduced household size.

#### *Employment Conditions*

Type of social areas is an excellent predictor of both the job stability and job status of the household head (see Figure 5). The one exception is households in the poor *colonias populares* (PCP), which have a higher-than-expected number of household heads with steady jobs and a higher-than-average proportion receiving fringe benefits. This simply demonstrates the fact that the type of neighborhood in which an individual resides in Oaxaca is weakly connected with the desirability of the job held by the household head. Job stability and fringe benefits are crucial to household success. Jobs that offer both are sought after and closely guarded. In the context of a restricted land market, therefore, a good job does not always translate to residence in the nicer parts of the city.

FIGURE TWO  
 MEDIAN PER-ADULT-EQUIVALENT INCOME AND MEDIAN NUMBER OF PER-ADULT UNITS  
 FOR HOUSEHOLDS IN EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE

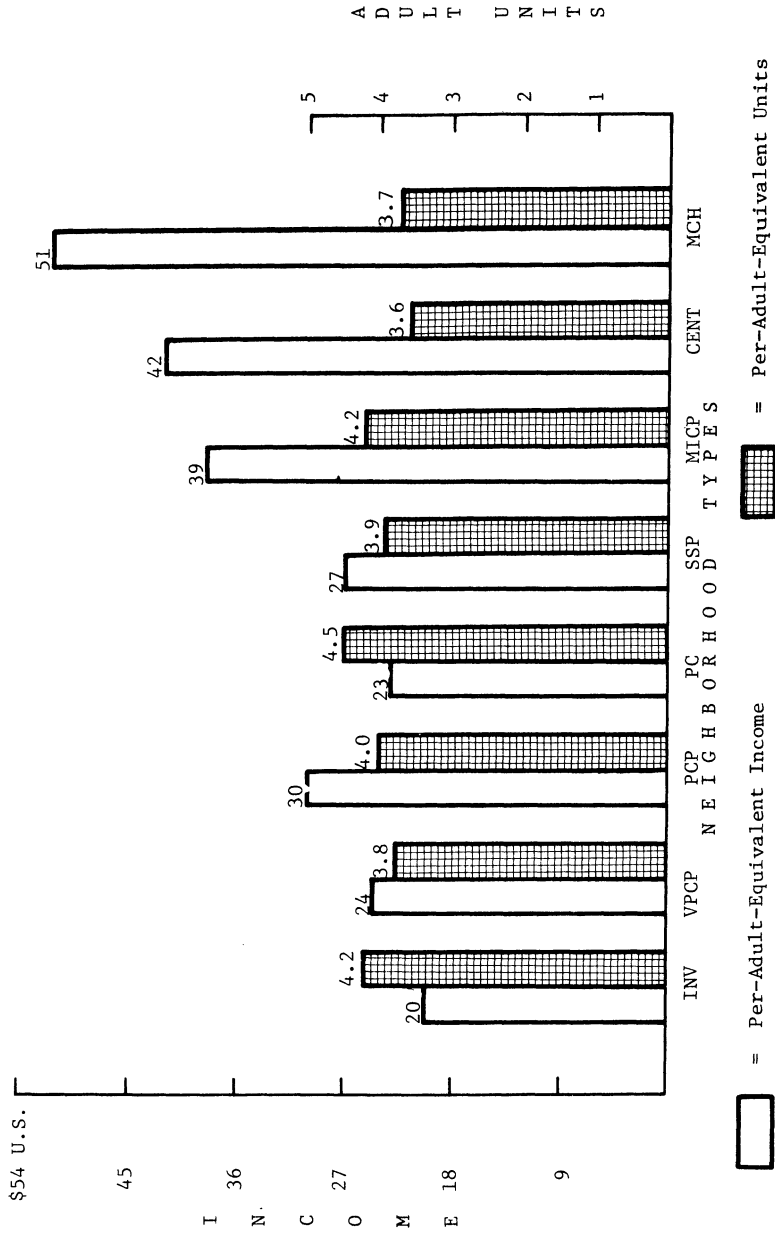


FIGURE THREE  
 PERCENT OF FEMALE HOUSEHOLD HEADS AND EXTENDED HOUSEHOLDS  
 FOR EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE

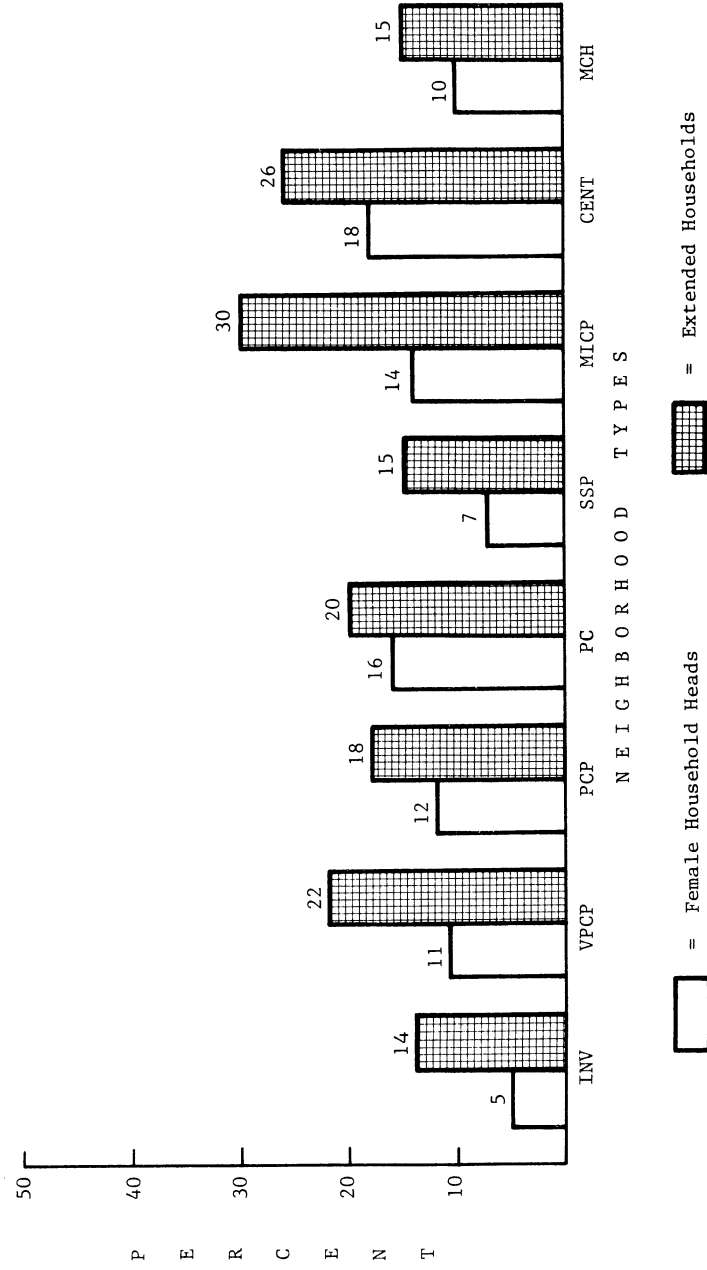


FIGURE FOUR  
 MEAN NUMBER OF WORKERS AND NON-WORKERS AND MEAN WORKER-DEPENDENCY RATIOS  
 FOR HOUSEHOLDS IN EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE

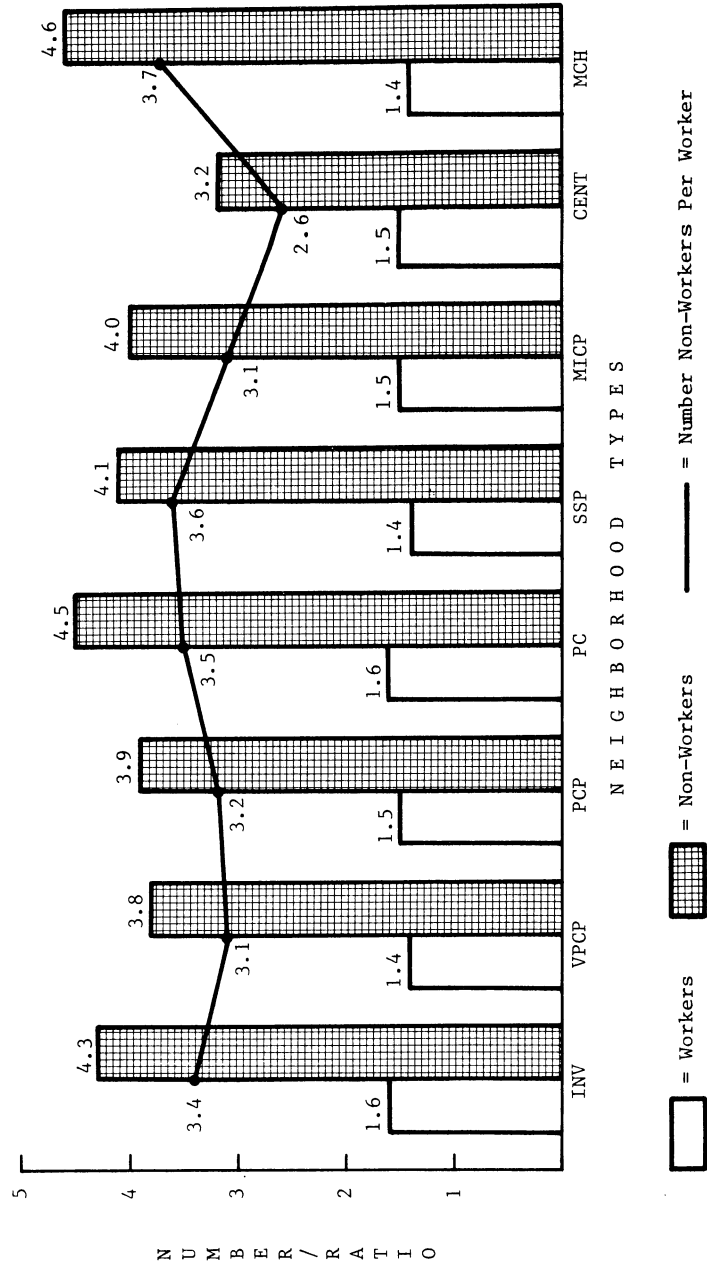
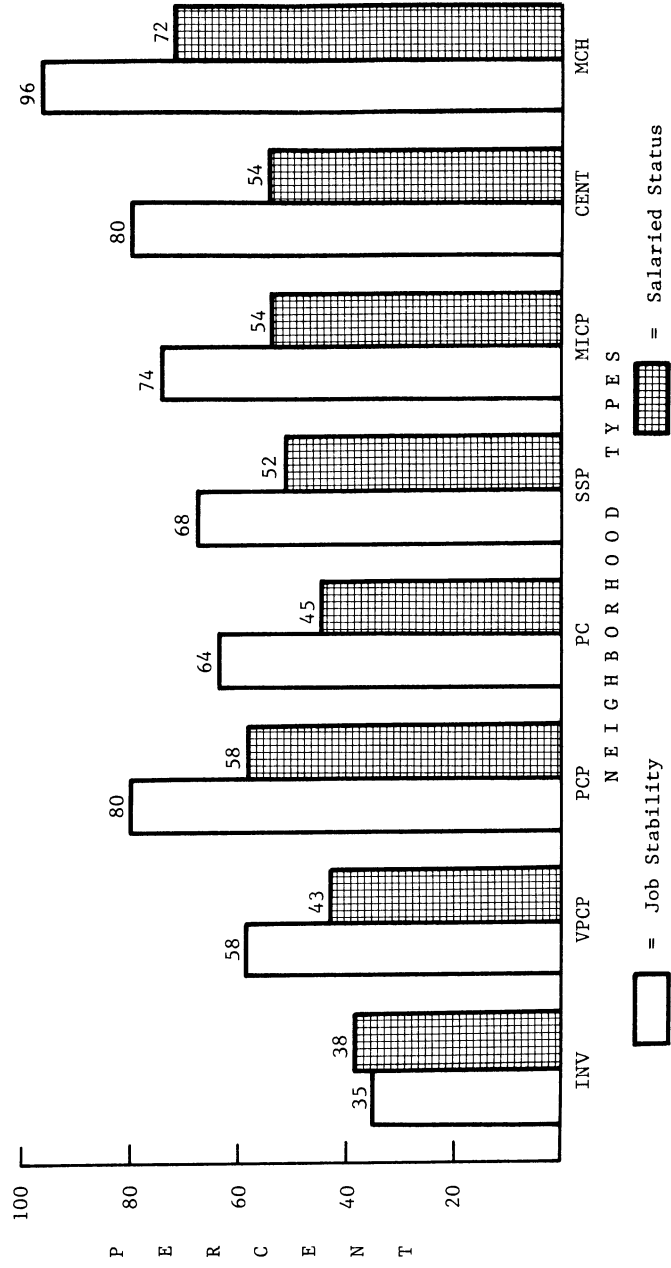


FIGURE FIVE  
 PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS IN EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE  
 WITH SALARIED AND WITH STABLE EMPLOYMENT



### *Educational Levels*

Figure 6 provides data on proportions of household heads who have earned primary certificates, together with the mean index of household education for each neighborhood type. There is a general rise in these two indicators as one moves from the lowest- to the highest-ranking colonias. As in the case of employment, a larger percentage of householders in the poor *colonias populares* (PCP) have completed primary education relative to their assigned rank. The household education index is only marginally higher in the next two colonia types.

### *Housing Conditions*

The lifestyle afforded by the six different neighborhood types in the city of Oaxaca and reflected in the physical appearance of their housing results primarily from the interplay of two factors--time and money. Given sufficient time, all but the most desperately poor households are able to make some improvements in the living conditions of their home. A comparison of the housing data from the invasions and the very poor *colonias populares* (VPCP) makes that point. Many of the very poor colonias first started as invasions. Within eight-to-ten years, nearly half the makeshift housing in the poorer colonias has been converted into some sort of permanent dwelling.

For those who have money--those whose place is in the highest rank middle-class living system--decent housing can be obtained without the passage of time. Middle-level government or private-sector employees may have to wait, however, until their names reach the top of the list for a place in a government-subsidized housing development. For the remainder of the population, the creation of a comfortable home and neighborhood environment comes about as an intricate interaction between the factors of time and money. The physical conditions of the living systems must be viewed in light of this consideration. For example, considering that the site-and-service projects are among the newest sections of the city, the differential in their state of permanency and modernity (represented in Figure 7) as compared to their companion living systems seems relatively insignificant (Stepick and Murphy, 1979). Given as much time as the *pueblos conurbados* and moderate-income colonias have had, site-and-service colonias will also develop into relatively well-established, comfortable places to live.

For most Oaxacan households, once they find a place to settle, the well-being they derive from their physical surroundings will come almost exclusively from their own efforts and sacrifices. They will not be able, by and large, to move into well-established neighborhoods such as the *pueblos conurbados* or the center city. Site-and-service projects remain a rarity. Households must begin at the start, working their house and their community up from the ground over a period of years. What assistance they get from the government in the form of basic city services and utilities will come only reluctantly after the passage of much time. For the majority, their aspirations for a house will not be much more than two rooms with a cement floor, concrete walls, a roof that does not leak, windows that have glass, and a bamboo fence. For this amount of comfort and security, the household must set priorities and make choices in light of other concerns that have as great an effect on the overall development of the household. These concerns include educating children and getting good jobs for those who work. For those households that most successfully adapt, their housing conditions can be a mark of that success.

FIGURE SIX

PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS WITH COMPLETED PRIMARY EDUCATION AND  
MEAN HOUSEHOLD EDUCATION INDEX FOR EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE

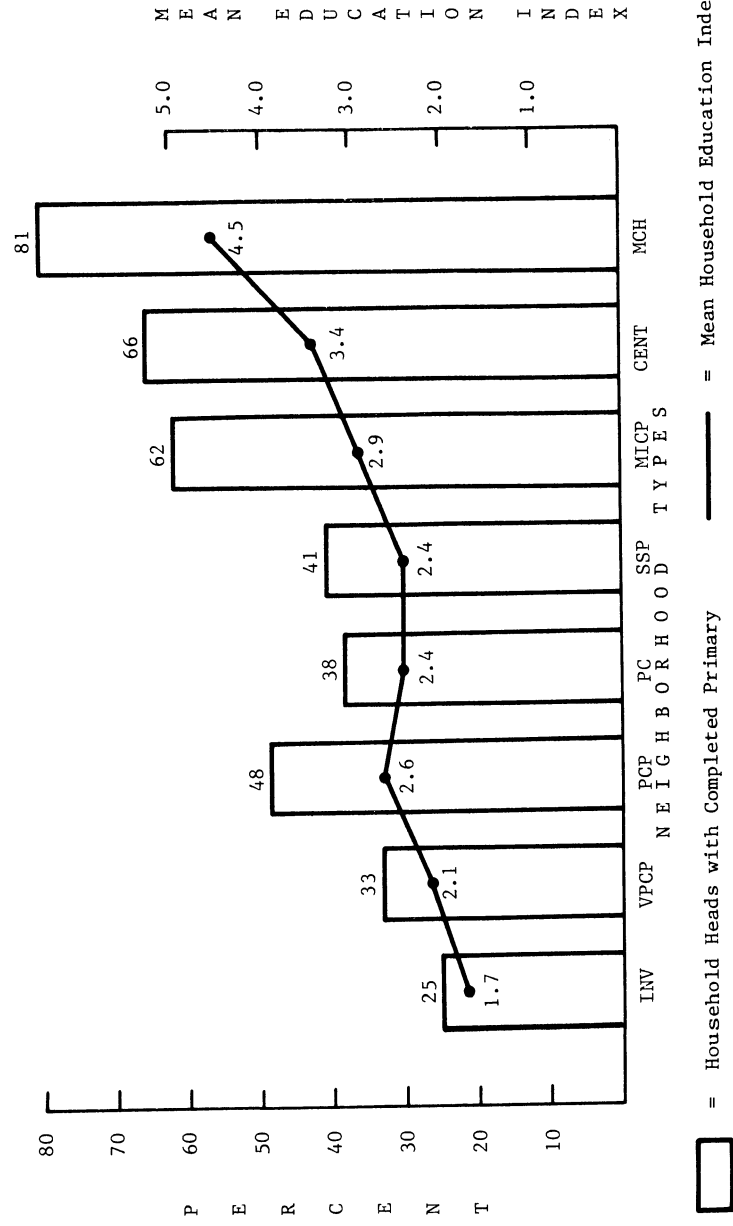
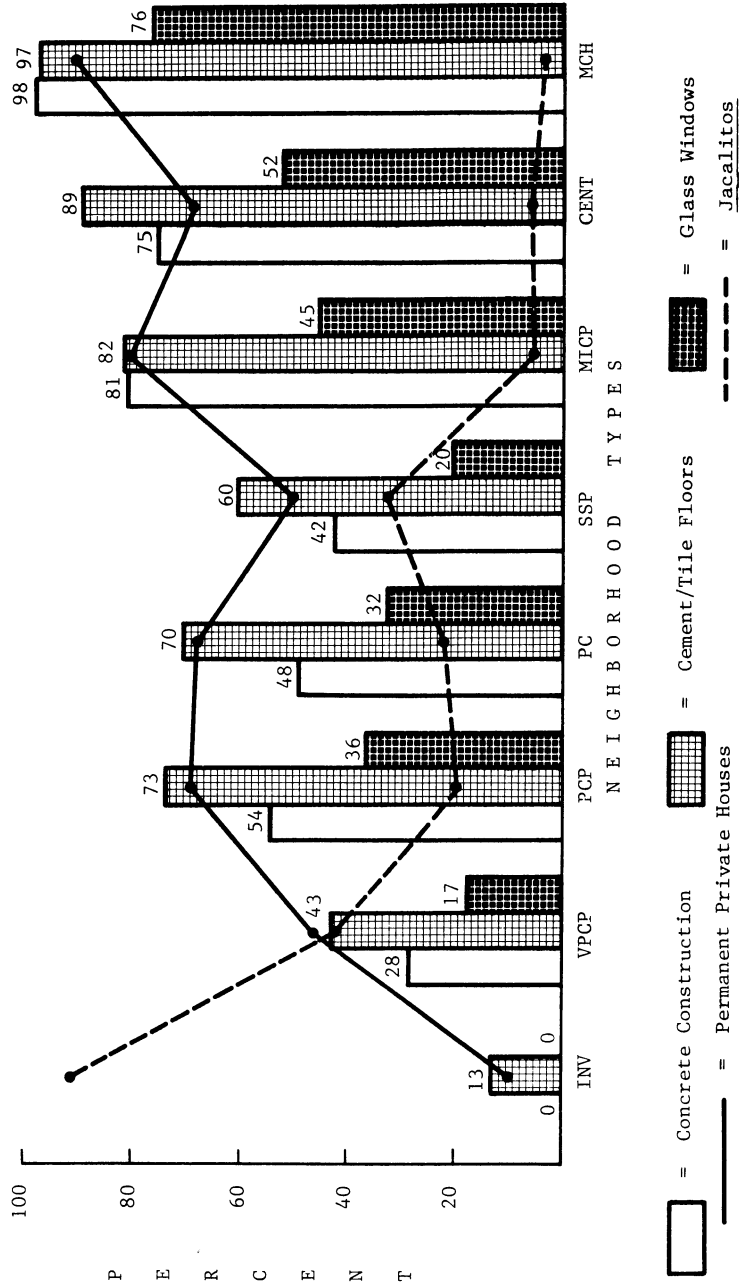


FIGURE SEVEN  
 PERCENTS OF PERMANENT HOUSES, JACALITOS, AND SELECTED PERMANENT CONSTRUCTION  
 MATERIALS USED IN EACH NEIGHBORHOOD TYPE



CONCLUSIONS

There is a debate in anthropology over the question of how to undertake a systematic ethnographic study of an urban area. In many of the places where anthropologists work, social scientists are faced with a lack of reliable survey data that can be used to stratify the city of interest. The Mexican Urban Household Project makes use of conceptual and methodological constructs from archaeology, architecture, sociology and urban planning. These constructs produce a picture of the types of neighborhoods in an intermediate city where reliable data did not exist before. Once the different living systems and their locations are identified, they can be used to mesh statistical data with a representative ethnographic sample. Social areas can be used as the first cut in a two-stage sampling method to develop a data base for comparing the socio-economic status of households within social areas and between them. When ethnographers know the number and variation in types of neighborhoods in a city, they are able to select a representative sample of households within each type for ethnographic work.

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