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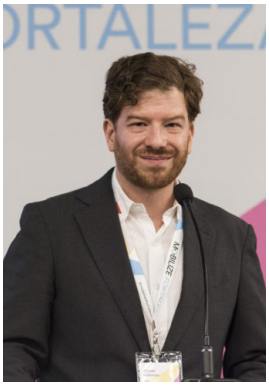
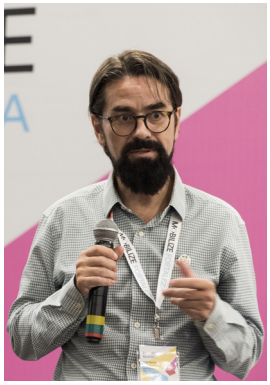
Lessons from Mexico City and Los Angeles: ITDP US and Latin America Directors in Conversation





Michael Kodransky is the Director of ITDP US, the newest and rapidly expanding ITDP office, with field offices in Boston and Los Angeles. Michael has been with ITDP since 2008, when he was a researcher based in Hamburg, Germany. Michael's work on sustainable transport with ITDP has taken him to cities all over the world, and his work has ranged from cycling infrastructure and freight policy to parking initiatives and BRT. @ITDP_US

Bernardo Baranda is the Latin American Director based in Mexico City. Bernardo has been with ITDP since 2006. During Bernardo's tenure, he has overseen ITDP's support for Mexico City's transformative Metrobus BRT and Ecobici bikeshare, two global best practices that won the Sustainable Transport Award in 2012. In 2017, Mexico City adopted ITDP's plan for parking reform, becoming the first major city in North America to eliminate parking minimums citywide. @ITDP_MX

ITDP: Michael, you started working in Los Angeles (LA) within the past year. What are your impressions of LA and the challenges it faces?

MK: First off, the biggest and hardest challenge to overcome is the size of LA. It is geographically a very large city. This is coupled with land uses that separate residences far from commercial districts, as well as a historic lack of investment in cycling, pedestrian infrastructure, and public transit. On top of this, existing plans are not being realized at the scale of the challenges facing the City of LA.

Fortunately, climate change has become a major political issue in California. Constituents realize that there are serious problems, and the transport infrastructure contributes to an existential threat, but driving remains the primary mode of travel. Political leaders acknowledge that things have to change; people have voted for policies based on and in support of combating climate change. Transportation has to be a part of climate policy solutions, but for most Angelenos, imagining a future where the region is well connected without being captive to driving as the sole legitimate travel mode is still a distant concept based on current daily lived realities.

ITDP: Bernardo, you have been based in Mexico for your career with ITDP. How are the challenges facing Mexico City new or still much the same?

BB: In Mexico, like the United States, the lobbying and status and culture of the car has been going on for decades, so it's easy to travel by car, but it's difficult to actually buy and be able to afford a car. People suffer this way. Cars are everywhere—they're bad for congestion, air quality, all the things we know about, and they're expensive. But often they're the fastest and easiest route to go somewhere. This is a problem, I think, we see in Los Angeles.

MK: Yes, a lot of that is based on history. Los Angeles grew very fast after the Second World War. Los Angeles infrastructure was built not just with the car in mind, but with the car central to planning. Land use regulations, highways, everything was built to spread out in a way so that people couldn't go anywhere without a car. As recently as 1985, there was no rapid transit in the City of Los Angeles. These mistakes we still see today: traffic sprawl, historic lack of investment in public transit, low-density housing far from other land uses, poor walking and cycling infrastructure. Municipal plans are not being realized fast enough and at the scale of the challenges the region faces. Driving is the dominant mode by far in the LA region.

BB: Yes, Mexico City made many of the same mistakes in part because we thought what you were doing over there made sense. Mexico City had a mayor who was popular in the 1950s and 1960s, and he actually based his urban model off LA, so many

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Photos: Top - ITDP India, Michael and Bernardo - ITDP

Lessons from Mexico City and Los Angeles

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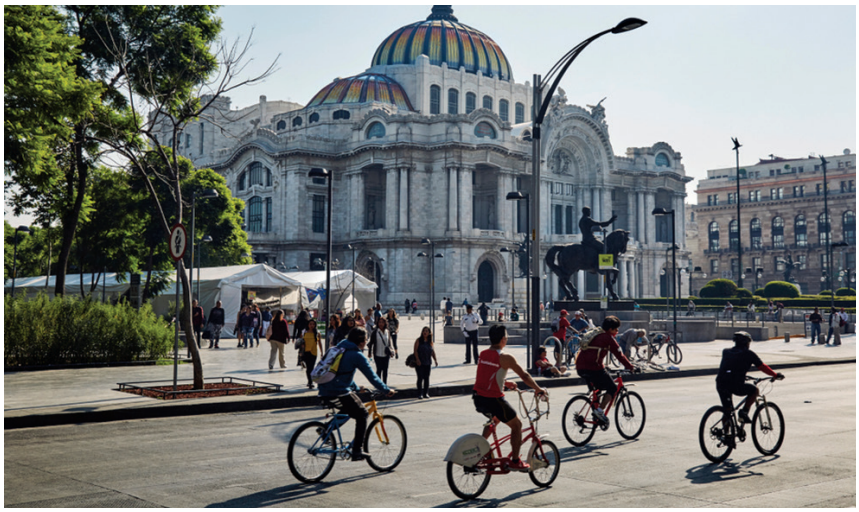
of the things that were done there were also related to car-oriented infrastructure. One thing we keep seeing is how much driving impacts air quality. Air quality is made worse by the fact that Mexico City is essentially in a valley.

ITDP: Air quality is a major issue facing both of your cities. Do you find that the connection between transport and air quality is generating political will for change?

MK: Los Angeles is notorious for poor air quality, and it remains a major challenge even with decades of improvements. Air quality disproportionately affects low-income communities of color, often due to historic redlining [a form of racially based housing discrimination], and transportation infrastructure design escalating segregation. In LA, highways are the greatest markers of neighborhood areas built through or adjacent to communities of color. As a result, exhaust fumes often directly harm people living near and around highways. Still, these days more people seem more concerned about climate change than air quality. But many problems—emergency room visits caused by heart attacks, strokes, other types of suffering among Angelenos—are also a result of continued poor air quality issues that people are struggling to name. I hope the connection with air quality becomes clearer and more urgent.

BB: In Mexico City, we also have an air quality crisis. When I was growing up, there were still refineries and factories within the city limits. Thankfully, they shut those down. The government put limits and restrictions on fuel for cars, so air started to improve and the toxic leaded gasoline was replaced with less polluting gasoline and catalytic converters. One thing that the city government does is a mandatory twice-yearly check that cars have catalytic converters. While the government in Mexico City seems to be concerned about the air quality crisis, it's a group of NGOs that

In 2012, as part of an Asian Development Bank Forum in Manila, Michael and Bernardo enjoyed a night out with local celebrities. (Left to Right) Jessica Zafra, radio host, MK, BB, Jackie Ongking, film producer, and Raymond Lee, filmmaker.



are working together to make the air quality better. They lobby the government to come up with stricter measures that improve fuel and change the measurement of what is considered clean and unclean.

ITDP: What is one of the biggest challenges that your city faces?

MK: The majority of transit riders in LA County, which consists of 88 cities including the City of LA, are low-income and disproportionately people of color. As soon as these transit riders are able to purchase a car, often a used older model with lower emission standards, they stop using the bus and metro. This may be a big reason transit ridership in the LA region was dropping before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Tackling historic inequality while growing ridership on transit by retaining existing users and attracting millions more to get on board is no easy task. LA Metro has a NextGen bus program, which is meant to increase bus frequencies on the highest ridership routes. There is also a complementary initiative to make the buses electric as a way to address the climate crisis and air quality concerns. These programs point to a future where Angelenos will have more options to get around without needing a car. Nonetheless, the sprawling fabric of the city and decentralized nature of the region will continue to present obstacles to promoting greater social equity and also getting people out of cars.

BB: For Mexico City (CDMX), density is less of a challenge. CDMX dates back to 1521. There were no cars then, and the urban form was created before cars, which makes it organically denser.

MK: Originally, LA was part of Mexico, and there is still a Mexican fabric that's visible. But most of the city is not like Mexico. Bernardo, how do you think LA would look if it were still in Mexico? If Mexico had won the war, what would LA look like as a Mexican city?

BB: I wonder how different LA would look. CDMX has some historical and cultural advantages over LA, for sure, but there is still a lot of work to do. We have to expand mass transit systems. Our current government is doing the right thing by supporting the BRT expansion, but they also have to limit car infrastructure and jobs need to be distributed where people live, or people need to find work where they live. Commuting many hours isn't good for residents.

MK: One of the things I love about Mexico City's BRT system is how it functions with multiple corridors. It's not just a single showcase corridor on a central avenue, but a true multi-modal and integrated network.

BB: Yes, that's because the first BRT corridor was designed well and then the rest of it grew from there. The growth was designed so that each was built off the next one—each line was designed to interact and be accessed by the other. The

Photos: Left - Michael Kodransky, Top - Wikimedia Commons

Opposite page: In Mexico City, Ecobici, the bikeshare system is a regional best practice.

Left: Los Angeles gridlock, a common site to many Californians. Degrading air quality and problems caused by climate change have led to increased political will.

BRT stations are also built near and along the metro lines. The BRT was built as a competitor to the metro, but this ended up creating a functional and interactive system—rather than competing, they can feed off each other.

MK: That is something I noticed in Mexico City and I don't know if I've seen it elsewhere. I love that the transit map includes the BRT and Metro on one map, so it feels truly integrated.

BB: Yes, that's true. It's one city with one system—you put both on the map and make them operate together. The BRT isn't the ugly stepbrother to the metro; it's a complementary service. They are all part of the same network. They work together.

MK: That is so effective. In the United States, there has been a historic, cultural bias against buses—they're stigmatized as transport for poor people. I think putting all forms of transit on the map equalizes them for everyone. It sends a message that they're the same. One isn't better than the other.

BB: Yes, I agree. I think that it was less about stigma, but more about simply showing that there is a vast network of transit available to people in Mexico City.

MK: Integration of mass transit on a map in CDMX gives cultural relevance and importance to both the bus and other mass transit options. Together, it makes it clear to riders that they can expect the same high level of service across modes—– enabling people to use the system based on their destinations rather than a biased preference for any particular mode.

ITDP: How would you explain the state of sustainable transport in your city?

BB: Mexico City has a pretty extensive transport system at this point. The oldest is the metro, which began its building in the late 1960s and now it's a network of 226 kilometers, but it doesn't serve all the city's needs. However, in the past decade, Metrobus BRT, now up to line 7, has helped to fill some gaps. One of the biggest changes is in cycling. When I started with ITDP, there were no cycle lanes at all. Today, Mexico City has over 200 kilometers of bike lanes and plans to build hundreds more. Ecobici, the Mexico City bikeshare system, started in 2010 and has been growing ever since. It now has about 30,000 to 40,000 rides every day. Still, we're not moving as fast as we need to address and meet the needs of the people, especially on the outskirts. In Mexico City, most jobs are concentrated along the two main avenues in Mexico—Avenida de la Reforma and Avenida de los Insurgentes. The people who live near these avenues have great access to these jobs, but for those who do not, they have to commute a long time and sometimes have to go as far as 20 to 30 kilometers away. There is no integration of the modes of transport. In Mexico City, we have many unintegrated transit systems and we have car culture, both of which are entrenched and difficult to break.

MK: Historic neighborhoods, especially those that were originally built around streetcars, are some of the most walkable with multi-purpose land uses. They also benefit from the latest transit investments. Some of these neighborhoods have the highest concentrations of car-free households. At the same time, some of the lowest income peripheral neighborhood councils suffer from a lack of urban amenities. Owning a car is very much a legitimate way to reach many parts of the regional economy based on the current infrastructure landscape.

ITDP: How has the coronavirus impacted your regions in terms of transport plans? Are you shifting strategy because of this?

MK: It's clear that this pandemic is going to change a lot of things about cities and transport in ways we don't yet know. Used car sales have also drastically fallen, along with credit and leasing schemes that drive the market. Transit is still being used by essential workers, but ridership overall is way down and transit agencies are facing huge financial shocks. We are already witnessing the devastation of city and state budgets. Cities are taking on extraordinary expenses, while losing their major sources of public funds, like the bar, restaurant, and other sales taxes. Just based on this, I think we'll see fewer expensive transit projects. US cities will be forced to assess what they can do with fewer financial resources. There may be a reassessment of the farebox recovery ratio that transit agencies rely on for their operating expenses. Maintenance, as well as operations, may be prioritized over capital construction projects. My prediction is that bus improvements, open street redesigns, Barcelona-style superblocks, cycling improvements, and LIT (light individual transport) lanes that enable micro-mobility will be ever more relevant.

BB: I agree with that. It's also impacting our strategy similarly. Most people don't own cars, and in a big city, you will always have a lot of people who have to take transit, even just essential workers. Another thing we're seeing here is concern around transfer points and overcrowding. Transit is much safer to take if transfers and overcrowding are minimized, so we hope to take advantage of that awareness to push for better integration and maintaining high frequencies. I do want to point out that in Mexico City we have been dealing with crises such as the earthquake, and the city is very vulnerable to climate change and the economic impact of a crisis such as this pandemic, so having resilient transit, whether that's cycling, walking, bus, or metro, we are lucky to have all the options. In this case, we're seeing the rewards of the last decade of implementing BRT and expanding cycling, and we urgently need to expand these options. ●

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