



■ Active Culture



The People in the Tents Say “Yes”

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY DAVID BACON

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Fernando Méndez has been a leader of the encampment from the beginning.

WHEN RUBÉN BEAS SAYS HE’S BEEN LIVING IN A TENT IN A PUBLIC park for five years, anyone might wonder why, especially since he says he’s not homeless, but staying there as a matter of principle. “I will not leave,” he declares. “This park belongs to the people of Tijuana. We will defend it.”

He’s not the only one. Half a dozen others live there too. A few more, like Fernando Méndez, come to cook meals for the occupiers, and then go home elsewhere to sleep. Beyond them stretches a wider network of activists who show up when they hear the police might be coming to run the protesters off again.

Why are people in Tijuana so angry that they’ve organized one of the longest and most determined occupations of public space in either Mexico or the United States?

By comparison, Occupy Tijuana (in the city’s Zona Rio business district) lasted a day before the cops arrived, arresting everyone in sight on the street median where activists had set up tents. Even Occupy Wall Street and other U.S. occupations were much shorter.

It’s not that the police haven’t tried to evict people from Benito Juárez Park. They have. But, each time, the occupiers and their supporters return.

The first tents went up in 2010. Soon, sky-blue and pastel-green nylon tarps stretched over a network of ropes, festooned with hand-lettered signs and banners. The largest declares the community’s name to passersby, in white letters on a black field: “Defensores del Parque Benito Juárez”—“Defenders of Benito Juárez Park.” >>



Rubén Beas in the tent where he sleeps.



Daniel Taramayateca is a poet living in the encampment. Behind him is a banner saying “Solidarity with San Quintín” which supports farm workers who were on strike this spring.



Daniel Taramayateca stands near the memorial the camp residents have made to honor the 43 students kidnapped and possibly murdered at the Ayotzinapa teachers’ training school in Guerrero.



In the early morning janitors and office workers troop in to their jobs in the two large buildings that frame the open space. One is the *ayuntamiento*—Tijuana's city hall. The other houses offices of the state government for Baja California Norte. As the day wears on, people arrive seeking permits, or trying to satisfy one or another of the many bureaucratic requirements Tijuana and Baja California make of their citizens.

Tijuana's cathedral sits across a shady street. On the fourth side, the steady whine of tires and boom of truck exhaust never stops—the incessant traffic on the main artery leading to the San Ysidro border crossing. Across three lanes of cars rises the concrete embankment of the Tijuana River channel. Except during flash floods, the river is never more a thin stream of water between cement walls painted with portraits of Mexican revolutionaries

By the end of the decade, Tijuana's population will reach two million. It will continue to grow as an industrial powerhouse. But will its workers, its artists, and its political activists still have these benches to sit on, under trees almost as old as the city itself?

Emiliano Zapata and José María Morelos, and even one of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the supposed reformer of the old ruling party, the PRI, assassinated in Tijuana during his presidential campaign in 1994, at the start of the NAFTA era.

In other words, Parque Benito Juárez is an urban park. It gives *Tijuanenses* a respite from city stress. The United Nations has a recommendation for open parks in urban areas—eight square meters of green space per inhabitant. Tijuana, according to architecture critic Rene Peralta, has one square meter per person. Given the city's demographics, it's very much a working-class park and a political space. That's why it's being defended so ferociously. City activists have set up a memorial to the 43 students kidnapped and disappeared last fall from the Ayotzinapa teachers' college in Guerrero. This spring, striking farm workers from the San Quintín Valley assembled under the park's trees, after caravanning to Tijuana to demonstrate.

The lack of green space is a product of the same headlong rush to build factories that also forgot to plan housing for the workers arriving in the city. In the 1960 census, before Mexico instituted the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) in 1964, Tijuana's population was around 166,000. The BIP promoted construction of the first maquiladoras on the U.S.-Mexico frontier. Three decades of factory building followed, much of the production moving from the United States.

In the 1990 census, before NAFTA went into effect, Tijuana had already mushroomed to nearly 750,000 residents, as people arrived from all over Mexico looking for jobs. The last census, in 2010, put the city's population at close to 1.5 million—about the same size as the city of San Diego, just 30 miles north.

San Diego has a 2.8% growth rate. Tijuana grows at 4.9% per year. Its urban density of over 1,100 people per square kilometer is more than four times as great. Hundreds of thousands of families have settled in informal communities without basic services, on dirt streets that turn to mud when it rains. The few parks are an afterthought, if they're planned at all.

Meanwhile, the industrial areas get pavement, electricity, water, and sewers. And of course, they get workers. At the heart of Tijuana's growing populace are the women who pass through the doors of the city factories every shift change. About 155,000 people work in 589 maquiladoras. The biggest is Foxconn, with 4500 workers making televisions and monitors. This plant belongs to the same Taiwanese corporation that owns a huge factory in China, which became notorious for such harsh conditions that several workers committed suicide. Each of the next five largest factories has over 3,000 employees, assembling TVs or medical equipment. Almost half the maquiladora workforce labors in these two industries. More than half work for U.S. corporations, and another quarter for Asian companies.

So a public park, even if it's downtown, away from the neighborhoods, is important. It's a symbol that the private sector doesn't just get everything it wants. That was the spark that lit the occupation's fire—a proposal to build a huge complex of stores, galleries, a theater, and a plaza, all on top of a 2000-space parking garage. In the process of building it, a private developer would cut down over a thousand trees and Parque Benito Juárez would disappear. >>



Cimatl Óscar Rodríguez gives a lesson in Aztec dance and drumming to children and adults in the Benito Juárez Park.



Felipe Gómez, a former baker, has been a leader of the encampment from the beginning. His horse says, “Finally [Mexican President] Peña Nieto Came Out of the Closet!”—an allusion to rumors that Peña Nieto had an affair with a man, and (with the bottle in the horse’s mouth) to rumors that he has a drinking problem.



Fernando Méndez and two other park inhabitants look at the trees they’re growing in a an effort to make up for those already cut down by developers who want to get rid of the park.



DEFENDING BENITO JUÁREZ PARK

Developers called it Zócalo 11 de Julio—the date chosen in honor of the founding of Tijuana in 1889. It was originally set to cost 900 million pesos (around \$55.4 million), but the price tag soon ballooned to 1.2 billion (\$74 million)—a quarter of the city’s annual budget. The project’s board president, Carolina Aubanel, is the ex-wife of the former mayor, Carlos Bustamante. A rude cartoon of her decorates a wall of Felipe Gómez’ tent.

To stop the destruction of the park, the occupiers have demanded an inventory of the plant life and an assessment of potential environmental destruction. A federal decree from 1975 says the Tijuana and Baja California governments can’t change the park’s land use. This spring the defenders succeeded in getting yet one more in a series of injunctions blocking construction. Their lawyer, José Peñaflor Barron, said the court acted “because the construction endangers the environment, and the existence of the park itself.”

But the law isn’t everything, especially in Tijuana, where developers and industrialists are politically powerful. Laws guaranteeing the freedom to

organize in factories are unenforced, while police help owners break strikes. In the park, the occupiers have faced arrest and expulsion, despite court orders protecting their right to public space.

The latest raid came on March 18, when state police drove the occupiers out of areas near the stalled construction. Protest leader Sabino Arellano Soriano said he had to flee to avoid arrest. “The police were asking for me, where I was, what clothes I was wearing,” he charges. “City workers warned us before police arrived, in solidarity with us.”

By the end of the decade, Tijuana’s population will reach two million. The city will continue to grow as an industrial powerhouse. But will its workers, its artists, and its political activists still have these benches to sit on, under trees almost as old as the city itself? Will Cimatl Óscar Rodríguez still have a space to rehearse his budding Aztec dancers in the soft evening after work?

The people in the tents say “yes.” **D&S**

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The Tijuana River runs down a concrete channel, with the Benito Juárez Park on the right.

