
**Make Condesa Mexican Again?
Peace Education in the Age of Cultural Gentrification**

by

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Abstract

Mexico City is not simply evolving, it is being reimagined through new waves of international migration, transnational capital, and cultural transformation. Beneath the surface of rising rents and English-speaking cafés lies a deeper struggle over identity, memory, and belonging. This study examines the question *what do the lived experiences and stories of locals and expats reveal about the dynamics of intercultural tension, belonging, and coexistence in Mexico City, and what possibilities do they open for conflict transformation?*

Guided by a peace education perspective, this thesis explores that question through grounded theory and narrative inquiry. The research draws on frameworks of peace education, conflict transformation, acculturation, identity, direct, cultural, and structural violence, and social cubism. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, including six local residents and six expatriates living in Mexico City. Through thematic and coding analysis, the research examined participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of cultural interaction, adaptation, belonging, and coexistence.

The findings reveal that integration is not automatic, but unfolds through moments of tension, misrecognition, and adaptation, reflecting both individual processes of self-transformation and broader structural dynamics that shape coexistence. The findings highlight symbolic displacement, economic and cultural tension, and a mutual desire for connection.

This study concludes that peaceful coexistence requires more than individual adaptation; it calls for greater intercultural understanding and awareness of the structural and cultural dynamics that influence relationships between locals and expatriates. The research points toward possible pathways including bidirectional intercultural training, context-based language education, and the inclusion of cultural memory in both formal and informal learning spaces. What emerges is not a solution, but a possibility: that peaceful coexistence can be built, not by erasing difference, but by learning to live through it. In a city as layered as Mexico City, where the past and present collide in every corner, the path forward lies in teaching how to see one another, with dignity, depth, and responsibility.

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Dedication

To my abuelito,

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You left this world convinced I was doing a PhD—a teeny tiny misunderstanding I may now be morally obligated to turn into reality someday.

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You believed in me when I did not, lifted me up when I fell, and cheered me on with a heart as noble as it was brave.

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Introduction

Mexico City is not only walked, it is also interpreted. Beneath its sidewalks, markets, and buildings lies a long, layered, and often silenced history. Before it was Mexico City, it was *Tenochtitlán*: an island-city of trade, ritual, and resistance. Over centuries, this city has been a meeting point and a battleground between worlds, Indigenous peoples and colonial settlers, rural and urban, national and foreign. It has absorbed conquests, migrations, modernizations, and reinventions, each leaving imprints that still shape the social fabric of the present.

Migration cycles are not new to this city. During the Porfiriato¹, Mexico City, influenced by the Second French intervention², was redesigned to resemble Paris, its avenues, façades, and aesthetics symbolizing a national aspiration toward European modernity. This symbolic project not only reshaped the city's appearance but entrenched social hierarchies that still echo in neighbourhoods like Roma and Condesa today. Throughout the twentieth century, waves of foreign migration, including Spanish exiles, South American dissidents, and Lebanese, Jewish, and Chinese families, wove themselves into the capital's urban fabric. While often welcomed for their contributions, these groups also provoked tension when their presence coincided with economic crisis or perceptions of privilege. Yet unlike today's accelerated transformations, integration unfolded at a slower pace, with more organic opportunities for cultural encounters.

¹The Porfiriato was the period of governance from 1877 to 1910, led by Porfirio Díaz Mori, during which Mexico as a country achieved both economic stability and political authoritarianism (Gonzales Ramirez, 2024).

² The Second French Intervention in Mexico (1862–1867) refers to the French military invasion that temporarily installed Emperor Maximilian I and promoted European aesthetic and political models later echoed during the Porfiriato (López Domínguez, 2020).

Today, a new transformation is underway. A visitor might notice the English menus, the rising rents, the cafés brimming with foreign tongues, yet these visible changes tell only part of the story. Beneath them, deeper shifts in identity, memory, and belonging begin to unfold. Expats, relocated by multinational companies, now settle in neighbourhoods like Roma, Condesa, and Polanco. Though few in number, their presence, accompanied by economic privilege and institutional support, has an outsized effect on urban dynamics. Entire blocks reshape themselves not around those who have lived there for generations, but around those who have just arrived. Inequality no longer hides in Mexico City, it becomes inscribed into the language of menus, the cost of rent, and the design of public space.

Unlike in previous eras, today there are pedagogical tools to address these tensions before they solidify, tools grounded in peace education, which seeks not only to resolve conflict, but to foster both individual self-awareness and transformation, as well as to transform how people relate to one another across cultural and structural divides. Guided by a peace education perspective, this study explores the research question *what do the lived experiences and stories of locals and expats reveal about the dynamics of intercultural tension, belonging, and coexistence in Mexico City, and what possibilities do they open for conflict transformation?*

Rather than explore detached policies or abstract frameworks, this research turns to the voices of those who live the conflict daily. Locals who feel their neighbourhood slipping away. Foreigners who arrive with curiosity yet limited contextual understanding. It listens to their tensions, but also to their hopes. This qualitative study draws on the experiences of twelve participants, six local residents and six expats from diverse national backgrounds, all between the ages of 26 and 40, and residing in the neighbourhoods of Condesa, Roma, and Polanco in Mexico City. Through semi-structured

interviews, participants shared how they navigate cultural differences, belonging, and tension, revealing both processes of individual reflection and adaptation, as well as broader relational dynamics shaping coexistence within these rapidly transforming spaces. Conversations were conducted in either Spanish or English, depending on participants' preferences, and all interviews were voice-recorded via Zoom or mobile devices for transcription purposes. I carefully translated non-English interviews into English to preserve their meaning and nuance.

All recordings and transcripts were securely stored on the University of Manitoba's OneShare platform. Participants were allowed to review and approve their transcripts to ensure accuracy (member checking), and all data will be permanently deleted after five years in accordance with the University of Manitoba's ethical research standards. The chapters that follow are woven from these stories.

Significance of the Study

This thesis emerges from the heart of a city in transition, and its implications extend far beyond Mexico City. In a global context marked by rising mobility and resurging nationalism, the challenge of how to coexist, ethically, meaningfully, and without erasure, is not unique to Roma, Condesa, or Polanco. From Lima to Barcelona, Nairobi to Hanoi, communities across the globe are grappling with the emotional, structural, economic, and cultural tensions brought on by gentrification and transnational migration (Inthamoussú, 2022).

Urban spaces are not neutral backdrops where social life unfolds; they are active sites where power, identity, and inequality are produced and contested. As Agnew (2011) suggests, place is not

merely geographic, it is also political, shaped by relationships, histories, and power structures that influence how people experience belonging. In cities undergoing rapid transformation, these dynamics become especially visible, as competing claims over space reveal deeper tensions related to access, identity, and recognition. Understanding conflict in urban contexts, therefore, requires moving beyond territorial disputes to examine how everyday interactions reflect broader struggles over meaning and inclusion (Agnew, 2011).

In this sense, cities become more than physical environments; they are lived spaces where broader societal tensions take shape in everyday life. Bollens (2012) highlights that cities often function as microcosms of larger conflicts, where divisions are not only spatial but also symbolic and relational. Urban conflict does not always manifest through overt violence; it can emerge through exclusion, segregation, and the gradual erosion of community identity. In contexts shaped by migration and gentrification, these tensions become embedded in daily life, influencing those who feel entitled to the space and others who feel displaced within it (Bollens, 2012).

These transformations are further intensified by global forces that reshape how cities evolve and who they serve. Kleniewski et al. (2024) argue that contemporary urban change is deeply tied to globalization, reconfiguring social hierarchies and access to resources in ways that often privilege some populations while marginalizing others. This makes cities critical sites for understanding how global dynamics are experienced at the human level, where conflict, adaptation, and resilience unfold simultaneously. Studying conflict and conflict transformation in cities, therefore, becomes essential for imagining more just and sustainable forms of coexistence (Kleniewski et al., 2024).

Consequently, this research provides a framework that is both deeply local and globally relevant (“glocal” in the words of George Ritzer, 2003) in the Global North and particularly for countries in the Global South that are experiencing demographic transformations while still healing from historical wounds. Its significance lies in the fact that it focuses on foreigners as well as placing equal weight on the empowerment of local communities, inviting them to reconcile with their past, reclaim cultural pride, and build a future rooted in self-worth. For nations whose identities have long been undervalued or distorted, through colonial histories, internalized racism, or globalized aesthetics, this thesis research offers a necessary pedagogical nuance. Integration, when conceived through peace education and conflict transformation, becomes more than coexistence as it also becomes an act of collective dignity.

This thesis also addresses the growing assumption that technology can replace lived cultural understanding. In an era of viral travel content and AI-generated city guides, it is tempting to believe that one can “Google” their way into belonging and connection. However, these shortcuts often produce misinformation and flatten complexity. They risk reducing entire cultures to stereotypes or marketable aesthetics, bypassing the depth and emotional labor required for making true connections. By grounding its insights in the lived experiences of both locals and foreigners, this research highlights approaches that are human-centered and historically situated, rather than algorithmically generated. It proposes relational proximity, not curated consumption, as the foundation of intercultural understanding.

Further, the thesis responds to a pressing institutional gap because in cities where governments are overwhelmed with competing domestic and international agendas, the social fabric is

often neglected (Dormois, 2013). Policymaking tends to focus on infrastructure, security, or macroeconomic indicators, leaving cultural integration and social cohesion as afterthoughts. This thesis invites decision-makers to pause and consider what is happening in the smallest unit of public life, namely the encounters between two sets of people in urban milieus. Whether it occurs on a street corner, in a classroom, or over a shared meal, those many interactions shape the emotional health of the city. And in a country like Mexico, where community is a core value of daily life, ignoring these micro-interactions is not only shortsighted, because it can have significant social consequences. By situating everyday interactions within broader frameworks of structural violence, historical memory, and both individual and relational transformation, this study contributes to both theory and practice. It offers insights that can inform educational reform, community programming, and public policy, recognizing that inclusion is not a gesture, but a process. It must be intentionally cultivated, nurtured over time, and continuously re-evaluated. In doing so, it affirms that culture is not only a community's intangible heritage, it is also socio-emotional capital, and one of the most powerful tools for building sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997).

The significance of this study lies not only in what it uncovers, but also in what it opens up. Research, like cultural integration, is a continuous process, always partial, and always evolving. To build truly inclusive and peace-driven cities, future inquiry must pick up where this work leaves off, confronting its limitations and expanding its reach.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 traces the historical layers of Mexico City as a site of convergence and contradiction. It presents cultural gentrification not just as an economic process, but as a symbolic transformation, one rooted in histories of colonization, aspiration, and inequality.

Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual frameworks that sustains this thesis. Peace education and conflict transformation offer pathways for engaging conflict not with avoidance, but with ethical relationship-building. Social identity theory and Berry's (1980) model of acculturation provide lenses for understanding how individuals adapt and belong (Sam & Berry, 2010). The chapter also introduces "social cubism", a multi-dimensional tool that reveals how economic, political, cultural, historical, and psychological forces (Byrne, & Carter, 1996) together intersect to shape urban tensions.

Chapter 3 details the qualitative methodology used in the field research. Guided by grounded theory and narrative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016), it honours lived experiences as both data and dialogue (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Interviews with 6 locals and 6 expats in the areas of Polanco, Condesa, and Roma of Mexico City form the heart of this work to understand how they each navigate shared space, often without a shared language.

Chapter 4 steps into the perspectives of long-time residents, the locals. Their stories uncover layers of symbolic displacement, economic pressure, and emotional fatigue. Yet they also express pride, resistance, and an enduring desire to be seen and heard.

Chapter 5 listens to expats' stories as they navigate new terrain, often unaware of the histories they inhabit. While some express obliviousness, others reveal a yearning for connection and a growing recognition of the impact their presence creates.

Chapter 6 brings these narratives together. It proposes tools for building coexistence: bidirectional intercultural training, culturally rooted language education, and the integration of critical memory into public and private institutions. Through social cubism, the chapter identifies the systemic roots of conflict; through peace education, it offers the possibility of transformation.

Conclusion

This thesis does not position either group as victim or perpetrator. Instead, it positions coexistence as a shared challenge and a shared responsibility. It affirms that living together, meaningfully and ethically, is not a passive condition. It is a skill that must be cultivated, one that requires both individual transformation and the continuous reshaping of relationships between people, cultures, and the structures they inhabit. In a time of increasing global mobility, nationalist backlash, and urban inequality, the stakes of this research extend far beyond Mexico City. They reach toward every city where difference is present, but understanding is scarce (Bollens, 2011; 2021). Because in the end, what begins with language can grow into empathy, and where empathy grows, transformation becomes possible. Transformation does not begin with data. It begins with stories as “constructive transcultural stories” that build peace and connections (Senehi, 2020).

Chapter 1: From Tenochtitlán to Global Metropolis, Mexico City

Mexico City, long before it bore that name, was once Tenochtitlán, a city-island rising from a lake, a ceremonial heart, a political force, and a trading hub where people from distant regions converged (Montell Garciglesias, 2021). Migration, exchange, and cultural fusion were not anomalies; they were the norm. These processes not only reshaped the city's physical and social structures, but also influenced how individuals came to understand themselves, others, and their place within an evolving urban landscape. Since then, the city has been built, torn apart, reimagined, and stitched back together repeatedly. Conquest, colonization, independence, revolution, industrialization, and neoliberalism have continually reshaped the city. With every wave of history, Mexico City has shifted not only in its architecture or economy, but in its soul. It is a city in permanent redefinition.

This continuous transformation unfolds not only at the level of urban structures and historical processes, but also through the ways individuals experience, interpret, and adapt to these changes in their everyday lives. At the center of that redefinition lies migration. The city has always been a meeting point between the local and the foreign, the powerful and the marginalized, the visible and the erased (Montell Garciglesias, 2021). From the Porfiriato's Europhile urban reforms to the post-revolutionary suspicion toward foreign capital, from the exiles of the twentieth century to today's global mobility flows, Mexico City has remained a magnet for dreams, contradictions, and displacement.

The following chapter traces that layered history. Not as a neutral timeline, but as a living context that explains why the current wave of gentrification, and the tensions it generates, is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a deeper story, one that helps us understand not just where we are,

but how we got here. Specifically, the chapter unfolds in six movements: it begins with the Porfirian pursuit of “progress” through European aesthetics and foreign capital; then turns to Roma, Condesa, and Polanco as living evidence of how aspiration becomes geography; next it examines the post-revolutionary renegotiation of belonging through immigration policy and racialized hierarchies; moves into the 21st-century surge of transnational mobility and global talent flows driven by nearshoring, remote work, and platform economies; traces how cultural gentrification reshapes daily life through language, prices, and taste; and closes by connecting these shifts to the thesis’s analytical lenses.

Where Progress Wore a European Face

In the late 19th century, Mexico City entered a new chapter, one that would redefine its skyline, its social fabric, and its aspirations. Under the rule of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), the country launched an ambitious modernization project, fueled not only by dreams of progress but by mounting foreign debt and the political will to turn Mexico into a global economic player (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024). Migration became a tool of that modernization. Attracting foreign investment was a cornerstone of Díaz’s strategy, and with it came policies that actively encouraged European and Asian migration. (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024). Railroads, mining operations, oil extraction, and factories were not just industries, they were signs of progress, and to build them, Díaz looked outward. Immigrants were not only welcomed, but they were also celebrated, if they embodied the ideals of “civilization” imported from Europe (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024).

By 1910, over 116,000 foreigners were living in Mexico, with Spaniards forming the largest group (González Navarro, 1994). Other communities, like Italians, Poles, Russians, Lebanese, Syrians, Chinese, and Japanese, each left their imprint on the capital. Although some arrived under precarious

conditions, their influence helped reshape commerce, introduce new industries, and diversify the middle class (González Navarro, 1994).

Yet beneath this celebration of diversity lay a more stratified reality. European immigrants, particularly those with capital or connections, often found themselves at the top of the social ladder. In contrast to countries like the United States or Argentina, where many immigrants began at the bottom of the social structure, in Mexico it was not uncommon for foreigners, even those arriving without wealth, to quickly ascend. Spanish immigrants, for example, were frequently supported by compatriots and eventually married into wealthy local families, while others rose through business or land acquisition (González Navarro, 1994). By 1910, foreigners owned nearly a quarter of the nation's land.

This dynamic generated a new symbolism: foreignness became synonymous with modernity, wealth, and status. The idea of "*lo europeo*" was not just an aesthetic preference, it became a social hierarchy (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024). The city itself was redesigned to reflect it. Wide boulevards, French-style architecture, tree-lined avenues, and cafés modelled after Paris transformed neighbourhoods like Roma and Condesa into embodiments of European aspiration. But *lo europeo* was not only admired, it was also a symbol of exploitation, and as foreign communities gained control over land, commerce, and infrastructure, resentment began to grow (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024). Their influence often came together with exclusion, privilege, and economic dominance. For many Mexicans, this planted the early seeds of distrust as the foreigner was not just a guest, but a powerful actor in shaping, and profiting from, the national landscape.

Yet admiration came with ambivalence. As historian González Navarro (1994) notes, foreigners in Mexico were often “privileged among the privileged” (p.175). Their economic dominance created resentment, particularly as their integration into national life remained partial. Many stayed within their own institutions, schools, hospitals, churches, social clubs, existing alongside but not within Mexican society. And while the government hoped for their “assimilation,” what it often got instead was separation, and some Mexicans even pretended to be foreigners to access the prestige associated with the status (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024).

These early tensions, of admiration and rejection, of dependence and resentment, planted the seeds of a paradox that still echoes today. Mexico City has long courted the foreign gaze, yet it has also struggled with the cultural hierarchies that gaze imposes (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024). The symbolic association between being foreign and being modern was born in this era and would continue to shape how the city understands itself and those who arrive. These dynamics did not remain abstract. They materialized in streets, buildings, and entire neighbourhoods. The ideals of European modernity and foreign sophistication were not just social constructs, they were built into the urban fabric of the city (Gonzales Ramírez, 2024). Neighbourhoods like Roma, Condesa, and Polanco became physical expressions of Mexico City’s relationship with foreign influence: spaces where aspiration, inequality, admiration, and exclusion played out in architecture, demographics, and everyday life (Infobae, 2022). Understanding the deeper tensions of today’s gentrification begins with the stories these neighbourhoods tell.

Roma, Condesa, and Polanco: Neighbourhoods that Tell a Story

If a city could speak, its neighbourhoods would be its clearest voice. And few speak as eloquently, or as contradictorily, about Mexico City's relationship with foreign influence as Roma, Condesa, and Polanco. These three districts are not just geographical zones; they are symbols. Markers of class, of taste, of aspiration. And over time, they have mirrored the shifting tides of migration, economics, and urban power.

Roma, born at the turn of the 20th century, was one of Mexico City's earliest attempts to emulate European urban design. With its wide boulevards, Art Nouveau facades, and French-style mansions, Roma was not just a neighbourhood; it was a statement that Mexico, too, could be modern, cosmopolitan, and elegant. For the elites of the Porfirian era, Roma was proof that progress could be mapped in stone and styled in Parisian flair (Infobae, 2022).

Condesa followed with a similar spirit. Inaugurated officially in 1927, it was envisioned as a residential haven for the upper class, particularly those close to President Porfirio Díaz. Electricity, paved streets, and proximity to Chapultepec Park gave it the allure of a city within a city. Like Roma, Condesa wore its European influence with pride, at once Mexican and not quite so (Infobae, 2022). Then came 1985. The earthquake did not just crack walls, it shattered confidence. Both Roma and Condesa entered a period of decline. Buildings stood empty. Security dropped. The symbolic heart of elite Mexico seemed to falter. In the aftermath of the earthquake, as property values dropped and many elites abandoned the area, these neighbourhoods became more accessible to Mexico's urban middle class (Infobae, 2022). Artists, students, and small business owners, mostly Mexican, began to rebuild and inhabit the vacant buildings, bringing new life and creativity to the streets of Roma and Condesa.

For a time, these spaces were reimagined not as exclusive enclaves, but as cultural incubators, lively, diverse, and distinctly local (Villasana & Gómez, 2017). The identity of these neighbourhoods began to shift, shaped by the people who had long been excluded from them. But cities do not stay still. By the early 2000s, both neighbourhoods began to gentrify. The same European architecture that had once signaled luxury now attracted a new kind of resident: artists, entrepreneurs, restaurateurs, and eventually, expats. Cafés bloomed where old shops once stood. Bistros replaced family-run diners. Slowly, the neighbourhoods began to look foreign again, but this time, through the lens of the creative class (Villasana & Gómez, 2017).

Polanco tells a different, but equally revealing, story. Once a quiet area on the city's outskirts, Polanco became a refuge for immigrants fleeing the upheavals of the 20th century: Lebanese, Jewish, Spanish, and German. These immigrants brought with them not only businesses and traditions, but also aspirations. The result was a unique architectural blend, Colonial Californian style shaped by American suburban ideals, woven with traces of Middle Eastern and European heritage (Infobae, 2021). Today, Polanco stands as one of the most exclusive corners of Mexico City. Home to embassies, high-end boutiques, multinational headquarters, and a growing expat population, it is no longer just a neighbourhood, it is a brand (Cohen, 2024).

Together, Roma, Condesa, and Polanco form more than just fashionable postcodes. They are landscapes where the past and present of migration converge, and where processes of aspiration, exclusion, reinvention, and memory are materially and symbolically inscribed into urban space (Cohen, 2024; Smith, 2002; Zukin, 2010). They remind us that urban space is never neutral, it is curated. And that behind every chic café or modern condo, there is a story of who was invited in and

who was pushed out. These transformations are not merely aesthetic. As housing prices rise and menus switch to English, long-time residents are slowly displaced (Infobae, 2021). What once felt familiar begins to feel foreign. And with every new boutique hotel or rooftop bar, the questions grow louder: What is the role of expats in this transformation? Who are they? How do they differ from other global migrants? And what part have multinational companies, and the nearshoring wave, played in shaping this new urban landscape?

These neighbourhoods did not evolve in a vacuum. The architectural grandeur and cultural hybridity that define Roma, Condesa, and Polanco today are also shadows of deeper tensions. As the revolutionary period dawned, admiration for the foreign lifestyle began to blur with critique.

The very symbols of modernity, European façades, foreign-owned businesses, multicultural enclaves, came to be seen by many as symbols of inequality and exclusion (González Navarro, 1994). The city, once eager to emulate Europe, began to turn inward, questioning not only who belonged, but who had benefitted. And in that shift, a new narrative began to take shape, one that redefined the foreigner not as a builder of modernity, but as its beneficiary, even its exploiter (González Navarro, 1994).

A Nation Reimagined: Admiration and Exclusion

The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) did not just aim to redistribute land or end a dictatorship, it sought to dismantle the social and economic order established under Porfirio Díaz (López, 2021). For over three decades, Díaz had equated modernity with foreign investment, European aesthetics, and economic liberalism. In this new post-revolutionary vision, reclaiming national identity

also meant reassessing the role of the foreigner, who now occupied a paradoxical place: both as a symbol of exploitation and a bearer of opportunity (López, 2021).

Throughout the 20th century, Mexico continued to be a crossroads for global migration, and the composition and motivations of those arriving changed over time. In the years following the Revolution, Mexico welcomed immigrants from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia; but this openness came with limits: while Mexico extended refuge, it also imposed new restrictions, shaping who was welcome and under what conditions (López, 2021).

By 1921, census records show over 28,000 foreigners living in the former Federal District; by 1930, that number had grown to more than 47,000 (González Navarro, 1994). Many settled in Mexico City, contributing to its cultural, commercial, and religious life. These dynamics were not just about identity. They were also about power. While Mexico celebrated its *mestizo* heritage and promoted a discourse of inclusion, the state also enforced rigid immigration controls rooted in racial hierarchies (López, 2021). New laws passed in the 1920s and 30s restricted the entry of those deemed “less assimilable,” privileging Europeans while limiting migrants from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (González Navarro, 1994). At times, this meant that immigration policies reinforced inequality, even as Mexico prided itself on offering refuge. Spaniards arrived in large numbers, some fleeing hardship well before the 1936 Civil War, while Italians, Poles, Russians, Lebanese, Syrians, Chinese, and Japanese communities also made Mexico City their home (González Navarro, 1994). They brought with them businesses, languages, cuisines, and religious traditions that layered new textures onto the city’s urban identity.

Later in the century, geopolitical turmoil pushed a new wave of migrants toward Mexico. In the 1930s and 1940s, Jewish families and Eastern Europeans fled fascism and the horrors of World War II, and decades later, between the 1960s and 1990s, South American exiles, fleeing military dictatorships and political persecution in countries like Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia, found refuge in Mexico City (González Navarro, 1994). Alongside them came Central American and Caribbean migrants escaping violence and instability in places like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Cuba. Each group added new textures to the city's social fabric while also reigniting old questions about belonging, privilege, and the limits of national hospitality.

Meanwhile, inside the city, a different kind of migration was taking place. Rural-to-urban movement accelerated dramatically during the 20th century, as people from across Mexico flocked to the capital in search of work, education, and better living conditions (Umaña Reyes, 2023). This internal migration reshaped the city's social map, creating the first rings of urban expansion and giving rise to working-class neighbourhoods on the periphery.

By the mid-to-late 20th century, this growth placed enormous pressure on the housing system. In response, the state implemented populist housing policies aimed at providing affordable homes for the urban poor, and these policies pushed development outward, creating new colonies in the city's margins (Umaña Reyes, 2023). Yet they also sowed the seeds for future conflict, as land speculation, privatization, and uneven development set the stage for the city's first gentrification waves.

Across the century, Mexico City was transformed, by those who came from afar, and those who arrived from within. But as the city absorbed new layers of identity, the questions remained: Who

gets to belong? And under what conditions? Unlike today's rapidly transforming neighbourhoods, many of these earlier migration waves unfolded at a slower pace, often integrating foreigners and locals through everyday interactions rather than reshaping entire districts overnight (González Navarro, 1994).

Click, Book, Displace

A new chapter of transformation has begun in Mexico City, one shaped not by revolution, but by algorithms, global capital, and the invisible infrastructure of remote work. In the 21st century, forces such as nearshoring³, digital platforms, the COVID-19 pandemic, and corporate relocation policies have converged to redraw the city's cultural and economic landscape. These are not abstract shifts, they are observable in the rising rents, the languages spoken in cafes, and the rhythms of neighbourhoods like Roma, Condesa, Polanco, and Reforma.

One of the earliest signals of this transformation came through near-shoring. In the wake of NAFTA and subsequent trade agreements, Mexico positioned itself as a strategic site for global production, and with near-shoring, where multinational corporations relocated operations closer to U.S. markets, accelerated the arrival of foreign professionals (Suárez, 2024). By 2024, foreign direct investment reached a record \$36.8 billion USD, driven by industries like manufacturing, technology, and automotive (Suárez, 2024). Alongside factories and tech hubs came a wave of expats, skilled

³ Near-shoring is defined as the relocation of businesses or factories from their home country to another country where operational costs, such as labor, electricity, fuel, supplies, and taxes, are lower. Mexico is an ideal destination for nearshoring due to its proximity to the United States and the NAFTA free trade agreement between Mexico, the United States, and Canada, which reduces taxes (Lázaro, 2022).

workers transferred to Mexico City, often supported by relocation packages that include housing, schooling, and lifestyle allowances.

Their arrival has reshaped entire neighbourhoods. According to the Mexican Association of Real Estate Professionals (Ampicdmc), rents in areas like Condesa and Roma rose by at least 15 percent between 2020 and 2022, with some properties now priced in U.S. dollars, while small apartments exceed \$750 per month, while larger ones can reach \$3,000 (Brooks, 2022). The average sale price of an apartment in these areas sits at 6 million pesos (about \$300,000 USD), far beyond the reach of most locals, whose minimum wage hovers around \$410 USD per month (Brooks, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this trend. Economic instability forced nearly 30 percent of Mexico City's residents to vacate their homes, opening the door for foreigners to move in (Brooks, 2022). As platforms like Airbnb boomed and remote work became normalized, entire blocks began catering to a new, global clientele. Cafes, co-working spaces, restaurants, and real estate agencies adapted to this shift, not just in language, but in pricing and priorities.

Among the new arrivals are digital nomads, remote workers who earn in foreign currencies while living in lower-cost cities⁴. Their presence, though often temporary, has contributed to a rise in local prices and demand for short-term rentals. In response, the Mexican government introduced a temporary residency visa allowing them to live and work in Mexico for up to four years, so long as their employer is based abroad (González Mera, 2024). While digital nomads contribute to the city's evolving landscape, it is the expats, those relocated by multinational companies, who are reshaping it

⁴ Exchange rate March 2025, 1USD = 19.94MXN (XE, 2025)

more enduringly. Unlike nomads, whose stays are often transient, expats arrive with corporate contracts, relocation packages, and long-term intentions.

Their employers must register with Mexico's immigration authorities, secure work permits, and provide legal documentation before arrival. Typically placed in high-level positions within industries like tech, finance, or manufacturing, expats benefit from housing allowances, international schools, and institutional support that buffer them from local economic realities. Their presence not only affects the housing market but also redefines urban life in ways that are more permanent, systemic, and harder to reverse. This imbalance has sparked growing tension. Despite federal labor laws requiring that 90 percent of a company's workforce be Mexican (Tolentino, 2017), the presence of high-income foreigners in elite neighbourhoods is impossible to ignore. They live in spaces that many locals are being priced out of. Their needs redefine markets, services, and even cultural norms. According to a 2023 InterNations' global survey, Mexico remains among the top five countries where expats feel happiest, thanks to social life, affordability, and the friendliness of locals (Guzmán, 2023).

But, what happens when friendliness meets inequality? Official data shows that foreigners now make up over 1.13 percent of Mexico City's population, more than 104,000 residents as of 2020, with Americans, Spaniards, French, and Japanese leading the influx (Hernández, 2023). Between 2019 and 2021, permanent residence cards increased by 45 percent, while temporary documents saw a similar jump (Navarrete, 2022). Many of those temporary stays become permanent, turning what was once mobility into permanence, and sparking questions about cultural sustainability. These numbers may seem small in proportion to the city's total population. After all, how much of a difference could a

few thousand newcomers make in a metropolis of over nine million? Yet the answer lies not in the percentage, it lies in the map.

When many foreign residents concentrate in a handful of highly connected, historically desirable neighbourhoods, the ripples are felt at a broader level. It is not just about who arrives, but where they settle, and in a city as fragmented and unequal as Mexico City, access to walkability, infrastructure, green spaces, and cultural capital becomes a form of power, and that power, increasingly, is being redistributed (Navarrete, 2022).

This is not just about economics, it is about identity, both at the level of individual experience and in the reconfiguration of relationships between communities. The very things that make Mexico City attractive, its culture, its food, its language, its rhythms, are being diluted in the process of catering to outsiders. Prices rise, menus shift to English, traditional vendors are pushed out, and the sonic landscape of tamale vendors and street sounds is replaced by noise complaints. The result is not just gentrification, it is cultural gentrification, where local heritage is slowly overwritten by a more global, more palatable, more profitable version of the city (González Mera, 2024).

It is in these contradictions, between hospitality and loss, between opportunity and displacement, that the next battle for the city is unfolding. Because if Mexico City has always been shaped by migration, then the central question is no longer whether change is coming, but how, and for whom, it will arrive. These shifts do not just alter who lives in the city, they reshape what the city represents. When the symbols of identity are repackaged, renamed, or replaced, something deeper is at

stake (Navarrete, 2022). This marks the turning point towards the quiet but profound transformation of culture itself.

Flavours Fading, Prices Rising

As foreign residents and investments reshape the urban fabric of Mexico City, what is at stake is not only where people live, but how they live, and whose stories the city continues to tell. Gentrification, fueled by the influx of expats and digital nomads, is doing more than reconfiguring the housing market; it is reconfiguring culture itself (Navarrete, 2022).

Traditionally defined as the process by which wealthier individuals displace long-standing, lower-income residents, gentrification in Mexico City has taken on a more complex and symbolic form: cultural gentrification. This occurs when not only people are displaced, but groups identities also get ignored as strategically undervalued groups get pushed to the margins (González Navarro, 1994). As newcomers settle into central neighbourhoods, Roma, Condesa, Polanco, and Reforma, the local character begins to fade. Businesses adapt to meet international tastes. Spanish gives way to English, prices rise, and the familiar becomes foreign. This shift is not inherently hostile, but it is deeply unequal. The arrival of higher-income groups has undeniably brought investment, security, and infrastructure improvements (González Mera, 2024). But it has also displaced traditional practices and life-ways passed down over generations. A cup of coffee may cost 80 pesos on one block and 30 just around the corner, stark evidence of parallel economies emerging in the same city.

Perhaps the clearest example lies in the culinary landscape. Restaurants that once served tamales or *tacos de guisado* now offer croissants and matcha lattes. Some dishes vanish entirely from

menus, deemed too unfamiliar or unprofitable for the new clientele. Even the salsa, the culinary soul of a nation, is not spicy anymore. Once fiery and unapologetically bold, it is now often softened to suit foreign palates. What was once a celebration of local flavour becomes a curated experience of comfort. It is not just a change in food, it is a quiet redefinition of taste, of memory, of belonging (González Mera, 2024).

Everyday life, too, has changed. Sounds once iconic to Mexico City, like the steam whistle of the sweet potato vendor or the call of the *tamalero*⁵, are now met with noise complaints. In some businesses, employees who do not speak Spanish are hired specifically to serve foreign clients, further sidelining locals. And many new residents make no effort to integrate linguistically or culturally. These shifts have triggered visible and symbolic resistance (González Mera, 2024). These changes are also visible in the everyday visual landscape of the city, as illustrated in Figure 1. Slogans like “Make Condesa Mexican Again” have appeared on hats, T-shirts, and protest posters. Online, debates rage in expat Facebook groups. Offline, walls are marked with graffiti: “Gringo go home.” What once felt like welcome is turning into worry as conflict escalates.

⁵ A person that sells tamales on the street.

Figure 1. Expressions of Resistance to Cultural Gentrification



The comparison some residents now make between gentrification and modern colonization may sound extreme, but it captures the raw emotional reality of watching one's community slowly become unrecognizable (González Mera, 2024). It is not just homes being lost. These shifts are not only spatial or economic, but deeply personal, shaping how individuals experience belonging, loss, and identity, while also transforming the relationships between those who inhabit the city. It is the loss of rhythm, flavour, language, sound, of the very textures that make a place feel like home. As these changes unfold, they intersect with larger geopolitical wounds. In the aftermath of the Trump U.S. presidency and trade tensions between Mexico, the U.S., and Canada, many Mexicans began to read foreign presence not only as economic displacement but as a form of entitlement (González Mera, 2024). "Buy local" is no longer just a slogan; it is a line in the sand.

Conclusion

What is happening in Mexico City is more than an urban shift. It is a cultural reckoning. Its neighbourhoods have become stages where global dreams collide with local memory, where the promise of modernity comes at the cost of erasure (Navarrete, 2022). And the people who have long called these places home are now asking: At what price? In that question lies something deeper than discomfort, a quiet unease that feels familiar, as though this moment has occurred before not in the same form, not with the same faces, but with the same unanswered tension humming beneath the surface.

To understand what is happening now requires more than observation. It demands a deeper reading of both the individual experiences of those navigating these changes and the broader relational and structural forces that shape belonging, power, and identity in the spaces we inhabit. In other words, the dynamics at play can be further unraveled by examining pertinent literature on identity; acculturation; direct, cultural, and structural violence; peace education; gentrification; and social cubism.

Chapter 2: Lenses of an Invisible Architecture

At the heart of every city lies an invisible architecture, woven not from steel or stone, but from identity, memory, and meaning. As cities like Mexico City turn into global hubs for commerce and trade, they face subtle and complex challenges, not only in terms of infrastructure or economics, but in the delicate social fabric that binds communities together (González Mera, 2024). What is preserved, and what is transformed? Who adapts, and who resists? And how do these transformations unfold within individuals, between communities, and across the structures that shape urban life?

This chapter examines the cultural shifts occurring in central neighbourhoods of Mexico City, particularly Roma, Condesa, and Polanco, through the following theoretical lenses namely, identity; acculturation; direct, cultural, and structural violence; peace education; gentrification; and social cubism. Together, they offer a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how individuals understand themselves within changing cultural environments, how relationships between locals and expats unfold, and how broader structural dynamics shape processes of belonging, exclusion, and transformation. These dynamics are examined across three interconnected levels: individual transformation, relational transformation between groups, and structural transformation shaped by broader social, cultural, economic, and political forces.

At the core of this research lies the central question: *Guided by a peace education perspective, what do the lived experiences and stories of locals and expats reveal about the dynamics of intercultural tension, belonging, and coexistence in Mexico City, and what possibilities do they open for conflict transformation?* Rather than beginning with predefined solutions, this question centers on

individual's lived experience as the entry point for understanding conflict and its transformation, allowing individual, relational, and structural dynamics to emerge from the narratives themselves.

To explore this question, the theoretical framework draws from a constellation of concepts, each one offering a lens through which to examine the intricate dynamics of cultural coexistence. To operationalize these concepts, the chapter begins by outlining the conflict transformation framework, which provides an integrative foundation for understanding how identity, relationships, and structural conditions interact and evolve within contested urban spaces.

Conflict Transformation

Identity and acculturation deconstruct how people see themselves and how they adapt in the face of cultural encounters. Galtung's (1969) theory of "direct, structural, and cultural violence" reveals how harm can be embedded in unjust systems and normalized in everyday life. Peace education is the process of developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that promote behavioural change and help prevent conflict and violence (UNICEF, 1999). It offers a roadmap for cultivating empathy, mutual understanding, and inclusive communities. Finally, gentrification (Dormois, 2013) and social cubism (Byrne; Nadan, 2011) invite us to consider the broader forces that shape who belongs and who is left behind. Together, these frameworks allow for an analysis of transformation at multiple levels: how individuals reinterpret themselves, how relationships between groups evolve, and how structural conditions sustain or challenge inequality. In this sense, conflict transformation is understood as a process that simultaneously reshapes how individuals see themselves, how they relate to others, and how the structures surrounding them are sustained or transformed.

These concepts fall under John Paul Lederach's (1995) framework of conflict transformation, which emphasizes peace as deeply intertwined with justice, and as a process that simultaneously engages personal, relational, and structural change. Lederach's peacebuilding method focuses on building the right relationships and transforming social structures through a profound respect for human rights, promoting nonviolence as a fundamental way of life (Lederach, 2015). Lederach's framework perceives conflict as a natural, normal, and continuous dynamic within human relationships that promotes constructive growth (Lederach, 2015). Importantly, this growth is not limited to relationships alone but also includes shifts in self-understanding and in the broader systems that organize social life. This perspective empowers us to analyze problems through various analytical lenses, creating a more comprehensive understanding. Three lenses are particularly useful:

1. Analyzing the immediate circumstances (the content) (Lederach, 1997);
2. Investigating the deeper relational patterns beyond the visible issues (the context) (Lederach, 1997); and,
3. Linking the immediate circumstances to these deeper relational patterns (the structure of relationships) (Lederach, 1997).

Relationships are the center of the theory, as conflict both originates from and returns to relationships (Lederach, 1997). Conflict is seen as the motor of change that keeps relationships and social structures honest, alive, and dynamically responsive to basic human needs (Lederach, 1997). At the same time, these relational shifts are experienced at the individual level, as people renegotiate their sense of self, belonging, and identity within changing environments. This perspective underscores the importance of addressing relational components in conflict resolution efforts.

Building on this foundation, peacebuilding expands this approach to encompass a comprehensive, long-term strategy for shifting from a state of conflict to one of sustained peace. Peacebuilding is conceptualized as a long-term transformation of a dysfunctional violent system into a sustainable peace system, involving changes in the personal, structural, relational, and cultural aspects of conflict (Lederach, 1997). This process involves different functions, roles, and strategies employed by various actors at different stages of conflict progression, represented in the form of a peacebuilding pyramid. The pyramid captures how an entire affected population in an internal armed conflict setting is represented by leaders and other actors, divided into three levels:

4. The top level (track one), representing top-level leadership such as policymakers, politicians, military personnel, and diplomats (Lederach, 1997);

5. The middle range, comprising individuals from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), educational institutions, humanitarian and relief organizations, academia, and the media (Lederach, 1997); and,

6. The grassroots local level, including grassroots workers, members of indigenous NGOs, and psychologists working with trauma victims (Lederach, 1997).

Applying Lederach's Conflict Transformation peacebuilding process to the thesis allows me to delve into the complex dynamics between local residents and foreigners, emphasizing the critical influence of culture and acculturation in these interactions to counteract cultural gentrification. Rather than positioning solutions at the center, this framework enables an understanding of how lived experiences reveal processes of tension, adaptation, and transformation across individuals,

relationships, and structures. Lederach (1997) argues that understanding the deeper relational patterns and cultural contexts is crucial for transforming conflict into a constructive force for repair, recalibration, and rejuvenation.

Lederach's (1995) peacebuilding framework highlights the importance of understanding how social structures and relationships interact, providing a basis for analyzing the roles of various stakeholders in conflict transformation. In this sense, transformation is not only about improving interactions between groups, but also about reshaping the conditions that produce inequality and the ways individuals interpret their place within those systems. Collaborative efforts, such as language-learning initiatives and cross-cultural training, can be understood as potential responses to the challenges identified in this study, align with Lederach's view of using conflict as a catalyst for positive change by creating opportunities for dialogue, empathy, mutual recognition, and fostering relationships based on understanding. These initiatives help preserve Mexico City's cultural heritage while fostering social cohesion and inclusivity, reflecting Lederach's (1997) broader vision of peacebuilding as a process deeply connected to justice and the creation of inclusive, respectful social environments.

If conflict, as Lederach (2015) suggests, is a pathway to transformation, then identity is the terrain upon which that journey unfolds. Before bridges can be built across cultures, it is essential to understand how individuals construct their sense of self, where they experience belonging, and what aspects of their identity they perceive as vulnerable to loss. Identity is not merely a label or a cultural trait; it is the story individuals carry, the mirror through which we interpret the world, and the compass

guiding our interactions with others (Lederach, 2015). In a multiethnic city like Mexico City, where the arrival of newcomers reshapes daily life, identity becomes both anchor and battleground, an emotional landscape that must be acknowledged, not bypassed, as a necessary condition for transforming coexistence into connection.

Identity

In any process of cultural exchange, integration, or transformation, identity is the core terrain where meaning is made and contested. For example, Celia Cook-Huffman (2020) defines social identity as the aspects of the self that are shaped through identification with particular groups, constantly negotiated in relation to others as well as the shifting boundaries between “us” and them” (Cook-Huffman, 2020). It shapes how people understand themselves and others, and how they navigate spaces of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion. In a multicultural urban setting like Mexico City, where locals and foreigners increasingly share physical and social spaces, the question of who belongs, and who defines that belonging, is not merely theoretical. It is lived, felt, and negotiated in everyday interactions. These lived experiences not only reflect individual processes of self-understanding but also reveal how relationships between groups are continuously shaped and reshaped within broader social structures.

Although identity begins as something deeply personal, it quickly becomes social as individuals come to define themselves through their membership in social groups, and the meanings attached to those affiliations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In Mexico, for example, people often take pride in being warm, welcoming, hardworking, and deeply rooted in family and tradition. Despite the vast regional and individual differences across the country, there exists a strong sense of “*Mexicanidad*”, a

shared cultural identity woven from history, food, language, and collective memory (Bartra, 2002). This collective identity is not rigid, but it forms an invisible thread that helps people recognize themselves as part of a broader national community (Bartra, 2002). However, this is frequently strained or redefined during interactions between locals and newcomers, making identity a central analytical lens for understanding cultural interaction and transformation.

Identity was defined by Barreto and Costa-Lopes (2015) as primarily a psychological construct, driving human thought and action, founded in individual psychological realities (Barreto & Costa-Lopes, 2015). Understanding one's identity is a continuous decision that shapes one's behaviour and actions throughout life (Murillo, 2022). Individual identity is typically perceived as an internal sense that manifests in personal actions and social interactions (Krijestorac, 2022). Social science approaches suggest that identity is both an intrinsic possession and an externally acted-out phenomenon, and this salient identity underpins both personal actions and social engagement, forming the basis for participation in group actions (Krijestorac, 2022).

Individual and group identities are interlinked, each influencing and reinforcing the other. As individuals navigate social environments, identity is not formed in isolation but through continuous interaction with group norms, expectations, and affiliations (Cook-Huffman, 2020). In multicultural urban contexts, these interactions often reinforce or challenge one's sense of self in relation to others. To better understand this dynamic, Social Identity Theory (SIT) offers a valuable framework for analyzing how group membership and social categorization shape individual identity, particularly in settings marked by cultural diversity and power asymmetries (Killen & Rutland, 2011). SIT posits that

once individuals identify with a social group, this group identity becomes integral to their sense and perception of self within the social world (Killen & Rutland, 2011).

SIT underscores that psychological attachment to social groups profoundly influences how individuals experience both peace and conflict (McKeown, Haji & Ferguson, 2016). These attachments are not simply affiliations as they shape how people interpret the world, respond to others, and assess their own worth. When a group identity is affirmed within a social context, it strengthens self-esteem and reinforces a sense of belonging (Horowitz, 2001). That said, when that identity is marginalized or threatened, individuals may experience alienation or adopt defensive behaviours (Cook-Huffman, 2020). This dynamic helps explain why cultural shifts, particularly those perceived as imposed, can generate emotional resistance, social division, or even intergroup tension in multicultural urban spaces as Mexico City is currently experiencing (McKeown, Haji & Ferguson, 2016). In this sense, identity becomes a key site of self-transformation, as individuals reinterpret who they are in response to changing social environments, while simultaneously influencing how they relate to others.

Building on this foundation, SIT further emphasizes the role of intergroup comparison as a key mechanism through which identities are maintained and defended. In a process known as intergroup differentiation, individuals seek to distinguish their in-group from out-groups to maintain a sense of positive distinctiveness (Killen & Rutland, 2011). These comparisons are rarely neutral, as they are shaped by broader power dynamics and historical narratives that determine who is seen as legitimate, modern, or entitled (McKeown, Haji, & Ferguson, 2016). Social identity thus functions as both a mirror and a social script, defining how people understand themselves and anticipate how others will respond to them (Killen & Rutland, 2011). In societies with entrenched class hierarchies, such as

Mexico, where socioeconomic status often defines access to prestige, voice, and space, the arrival of affluent foreigners can be experienced not only as economic displacement but as symbolic exclusion, eroding the social visibility and cultural centrality of long-standing local groups (Agnew, 2020). These processes illustrate how identity is not only individually experienced but also embedded within unequal social structures that shape interactions between groups.

Group identity is crucial for psychological well-being and societal functioning, shaping individual self-definition and self-esteem, fostering a sense of belonging and differentiation from others (Byrne & Nadan, 2011). This interaction between individual and group identities helps distinguish “us” from “them,” highlighting the dynamic and intersubjective nature of identity formation (Krijestorac, 2022).

This dynamic interplay becomes even more significant in rapidly evolving urban environments, where both internal shifts and external forces continuously reshape the boundaries of identity (Bollens, 2015). As group identities evolve in response to internal dynamics and external pressures, identity emerges as both a stabilizing force and an adaptive process. Research suggests that identity often functions as an anchor in an ever-changing world, yet remains capable of transformation through learning, shared experiences, and the routinization of new behaviours (Krijestorac, 2022). When communities undergo significant cultural shifts, such as those prompted by gentrification or foreign influx, new individual actions can gradually redefine collective self-perceptions (Agnew & Mercer, 2010). Over time, these changes may lead the group to expand, contract, or reconfigure its identity altogether (Agnew & Duncan, 2015). Ultimately, identity is not merely a legacy of the past, but a living construct, reshaped by how individuals and groups respond to emerging social realities.

In this sense, Mexican identity as a collective construct is deeply rooted in a rich cultural heritage and historical legacy. Mexico's cultural diversity, encompassing various languages, traditions, attire, and cuisines, is a hallmark of its identity (Benymar, 2019). The distinctiveness of Mexicans is shaped by the land that nurtured ancient civilizations such as the Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Toltecs, Olmecs, Mayans, Totonacs, Teotihuacans, Chichimecs, and Mexicas. These cultures left a significant legacy and cultural heritage that continues to define Mexico today, influencing how Mexicans perceive and interact with the world (Benymar, 2019).

Identity constantly evolves and similarly, Mexican identity in the 21st century is a dynamic work in progress, continually being shaped and reshaped (Moctezuma Barragan, 2022). Throughout its history, Mexico has developed various cultures and identities, each distinct yet sharing common features, underscoring the complexity of a Mexican national identity influenced by historical legacies and contemporary realities (Moctezuma Barragan, 2022).

Understanding the multifaceted nature of identity is crucial for addressing cultural gentrification and promoting social cohesion in urban contexts like Mexico City. By recognizing the interplay between personal, group, and cultural identities, interventions can be tailored to foster inclusivity and preserve community identity (Cook-Huffman, 2020). Moreover, considering the inseparable link between language and identity, language-learning programs can serve to facilitate cultural integration and mitigate the adverse effects of cultural displacement on both newcomers and local residents (Norton, 2013; Kramsch, 1998). Language carries culture, values, meanings, and ways of relating to others. Newcomers can engage more meaningfully with the local context by learning it,

while culturally grounded programs can also affirm and protect local identities, fostering more inclusive forms of coexistence.

At the same time, however, identity is only one strand of this dynamic. When people from different cultures meet, identity does not exist in isolation, it enters into motion as it is challenged, reshaped, protected, or fused through the ongoing process of *acculturation* (Agnew & Mercer, 2010). In a city as vibrant and complex as Mexico City, where tradition meets globalization on every street corner, understanding how individuals and communities adapt, or resist adapting, to cultural change becomes essential. Acculturation invites us to explore what happens after we ask “*Who am I?*” And instead begin asking, “*How do I live alongside those who are different from me?*”

Acculturation

If identity answers the question of *who one is*, then acculturation helps us understand *who individuals become* when cultures collide. It is the silent choreography that unfolds as people cross borders, not just geographically, but emotionally and socially (Berry, 1997). Acculturation refers to the process of cultural and psychological change that occurs when individuals come into continuous contact with a new cultural environment (Berry, 1997). In a city like Mexico City, where diversity pulses through every street and plaza, the process of adaptation is not a one-way journey. It is a mutual negotiation, where cultures meet, blend, resist, and evolve. Understanding acculturation allows us to explore how people navigate this meeting point, what they hold on to, what they adapt and adopt to, and how they redefine their place in the world. These processes reflect not only internal transformations of identity but also shifts in relationships between groups and the broader social dynamics in which these interactions are embedded.

Acculturation is a crucial lens for this thesis, as it enables us to interpret how expats make sense of their new environments, negotiate belonging, and engage, or not, with the host culture. More importantly, it helps reveal how lived experiences reflect processes of adaptation, tension, and negotiation across individuals and communities. It helps illuminate the spectrum of adaptation, from full integration to cultural withdrawal, and reveals the often-unspoken psychological and emotional layers behind everyday interactions (Berry, 1997). In the context of Mexico City, where cultural identity is both cherished and constantly evolving, acculturation offers a powerful tool to understand how newcomers position themselves in relation to the local community, and how that positioning shapes the cultural landscape for everyone involved (Berry, 1980).

Acculturation, initially conceptualized by Milton Gordon in 1964, delineated a linear process where immigrants were expected to relinquish their cultural heritage upon adopting the values of their new homelands. However, by the early 1980s, cultural psychologists recognized the inadequacy of this unidimensional model. Berry (1980) proposed a multifaceted approach, suggesting that acquiring the beliefs and practices of the receiving country does not necessitate discarding one's cultural heritage (cited in Schwarts, et al., 2010).

Berry's model introduced the notion of independent variables that determine culture acquisition and heritage/culture retention, such as biological, social, and physical aspects. This multidimensional perspective reframed acculturation, acknowledging its complexity and diverse outcomes (Berry, 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010). Acculturation is not merely an individual phenomenon but also a collective process, which becomes evident when analyzing the contact between cultural

populations, and this interaction results in profound cultural and psychological changes, altering collective activities, social institutions, and individual behavioral changes under:

- Assimilation: individuals or groups adopt the culture of the host society while abandoning their cultural heritage
- Separation: individuals or groups refuse to embrace the host culture and instead maintain strong allegiance to their cultural heritage
- Integration: People who embrace the host culture while preserving their cultural heritage, striking a balance between the two
- Marginalization: Those who refuse to adhere to either their heritage or receiving cultures, leading to a sense of alienation from both (Schwartz et al., 2010, pp. 24-28).

Contemporary literature, recognized acculturation as a complex process influenced by interactions with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social contexts (Schwartz et al., 2010). For example, Ward (2001) noted that acculturation is a process that impacts behavioral, and cognitive aspects, each reflecting distinct theoretical orientations within the field (Cited in Berry, 2010). This framework clearly demonstrates that adaptation to cultural contact is neither uniform nor neutral, as it is shaped by complex and contextual forces.

While acculturation can occur in a variety of contexts it is most frequently studied among immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. This emphasis on strategically undervalued and marginalized groups highlights the importance of understanding how these individuals navigate unfamiliar and often challenging cultural landscapes (Berry, 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010). Acculturation becomes evident when immigrants strive to naturalize a new way of living, blending their cultural

heritage with the habits and traditions of the host society, an adaptive process that produces a hybrid cultural identity (Berry, 1997).

Acculturation is intrinsically linked to adaptation, influencing individual psychological well-being and sociocultural management (Berry, 1997). As individuals and groups navigate the complexities of cultural contact, they bring unique qualities to the new society, initiating a reciprocal exchange of cultural and psychological attributes (Berry, 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010). This reciprocal process highlights how transformation is not limited to newcomers alone but also reshapes the relational dynamics between groups and the cultural fabric of the host society.

Acculturation serves as a pivotal concept guiding the integration of newcomers into the local culture of Mexico City. By relying upon Berry's (2010) multidimensional model, which emphasizes the retention of cultural heritage alongside the adoption of host society values, the present research aims to facilitate an exploration of cultural exchange and mutual enrichment between foreigners and locals. By recognizing acculturation as a collective endeavour, the present research seeks to foster harmonious coexistence and celebrate cultural diversity, thus mitigating the risks of cultural gentrification and promoting social cohesion in Mexico City's multicultural landscape. Rather than assuming integration as a linear or ideal outcome, this perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how belonging is constructed, contested, and experienced across different social positions.

Berry's (2010) model operates by examining two central dimensions: the degree to which individuals value maintaining their cultural heritage, and the degree to which they seek interaction with the host society. These dimensions shape acculturation outcomes, producing four strategic responses,

assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry, 2010). However, beyond typologies, the model assumes that cultural contact generates significant psychological and social challenges, like major life transitions. When these transitions are experienced as overwhelming and coping mechanisms are insufficient, individuals may encounter what Berry (2010) terms acculturative stress. This stress reflects a dissonance between one's internal cultural identity and external social demands, revealing how adaptation is not just behavioural but deeply emotional and context-dependent (Berry, 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010). In this sense, acculturation becomes a key site of self-transformation, where individuals renegotiate identity, belonging, and meaning in response to new environments.

Understanding these internal processes of adaptation is essential, but insufficient on its own; the broader structural conditions surrounding acculturation must also be examined. The integration of foreigners into Mexico City's cultural fabric may foster harmony, but it can also provoke resentment, tension, and feelings of exclusion when unequal access, privilege, or indifference undermine social cohesion. These dynamics reveal how acculturation unfolds within unequal structures that shape not only opportunities for interaction, but also the terms under which belonging is negotiated.

To understand these undercurrents, it is necessary to broaden the analytical lens from culture to structure, from individual interactions to systemic patterns. This is where Johan Galtung's (1969) framework of direct, structural, and cultural violence becomes a vital tool in this context, offering insight into how invisible forces can silently shape, distort, or even fracture efforts toward peaceful coexistence.

Direct, Structural, and Cultural Violence

If identity asks who individuals are, and acculturation explores who they become in contact with others, then the question becomes: what causes harm in that process? Not all damage is loud or immediate. In fact, some of the most enduring forms of harm are the ones that go unseen, embedded within cultural policies, habits, practices, institutions, and assumptions. Johan Galtung's (1990) framework of direct, structural, and cultural violence reveals how inequality, exclusion, and injustice can persist even in peaceful-looking settings (Galtung, 1990). In multicultural cities like Mexico City, where diverse communities converge, understanding these invisible forces is essential for envisioning more equitable and respectful forms of coexistence. Importantly, these forms of violence shape not only social structures, but also how individuals experience themselves and how relationships between groups are formed, strained, or transformed.

Galtung (1990) identifies and classifies violence into three fundamental types: direct, structural, and cultural, providing a framework for understanding its multifaceted nature. Each type operates within distinct temporal and causal dimensions, with cultural violence often exhibiting a persistent presence due to the gradual evolution of fundamental cultural norms (Galtung, 1990).

Direct violence is characterized by distinct events, such as physical assault, verbal harassment, discriminatory policing, or xenophobic attacks, where harm is visibly inflicted and the perpetrator is identifiable. It frequently serves to establish structural violence, which manifests as systemic inequalities and injustices embedded within societal frameworks. Over time, efforts to address structural violence may inadvertently perpetuate direct violence, as attempts to dismantle oppressive structures could result in resistance aimed at preserving the status quo (Galtung, 1990). Both direct and

structural violence can inflict acute deprivation upon individuals, resulting in trauma when experienced suddenly or collective trauma when endured by entire communities. These traumatic experiences can shape historical trajectories, influencing people's collective consciousness and contributing to societal narratives (Galtung, 1990). In this sense, violence is not only external, but it is also internalized, shaping how individuals interpret their experiences, their sense of belonging, and their relationship to others.

Galtung identified the interplay of the three classifications of violence as creating a triangular syndrome wherein violence breeds further violence, often becoming institutionalized and ritualistic. The normalization of violence within a society can lead to cyclical patterns of conflict and retaliation, perpetuating harm across generations and communities as it prevents the optimum development of each person (Galtung, 1990). In contrast to this characterization of violence, a corresponding triangular characterization of peace envisions cultural peace fostering structural peace, which in turn enables direct peace through cooperative and equitable relationships among diverse stakeholders. Achieving such a state requires holistic efforts that target all three dimensions simultaneously, recognizing that change in one corner of the triangle may not necessarily induce change in the others (Galtung, 1990). This triangular vision of peace is particularly relevant in multicultural contexts like Mexico City, where fostering structural and cultural peace is essential to achieving meaningful and lasting interpersonal harmony among diverse communities. It also reinforces the idea that transformation must occur simultaneously at the level of the self, relationships, and systems.

Furthermore, cultural violence, as conceptualized by Galtung (1990), encompasses the cultural elements that justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. This includes religious and

ideological doctrines, linguistic constructs, artistic expressions, and scientific paradigms that serve to uphold oppressive systems make direct and structural violence legitimate and normal (Galtung, 1990).

The examination of cultural violence reveals how both direct and structural violence can become justified and normalized within society. As Galtung (1990) explains, cultural violence operates by altering the moral perception of actions, making them seem less reprehensible and even acceptable. He illustrates this with a color metaphor: actions initially perceived as morally wrong (red) can, through cultural framing, come to be seen as acceptable (green), or at least morally ambiguous and tolerable (yellow) (Galtung, 1990, p. 292). This conceptual lens helps illuminate the complexities arising from the influx of foreigners into Mexico. Their presence was initially perceived as “green,” representing vitality and promise, contributing significantly to the nation’s economic growth, fostering diplomatic relationships, and amplifying Mexico’s international visibility and soft power. However, as cities increasingly adapt to the needs and preferences of these newcomers, this transformation risks shifting into a “yellow” zone of moral ambivalence. Subtle changes, such as offering non-spicy salsa or hiring non-Spanish-speaking staff in traditionally Mexican establishments, may appear minor but reflect deeper cultural accommodations. These adjustments, while often well-intentioned, raise concerns about the gradual dilution of local identity and traditions. Although the initial phase of this cultural shift was welcomed as progress, its long-term trajectory remains uncertain. This dynamic process, shaped by demographic changes, policy decisions, and economic pressures, may eventually return to a constructive equilibrium “green” or escalate toward social tension and cultural erosion or “red.” These shifts are not only structural or cultural, but they are also experienced at the level of everyday interactions, where individuals negotiate meaning, belonging, and difference.

Identifying cultural violence requires a subtle understanding of how culture can both promote and undermine peace and justice. Cultures themselves are not inherently violent; it is the use of cultural elements (flags, national anthems, etc.) to justify violence that constitutes cultural violence, so that the pursuit of a "peace culture" involves identifying and promoting cultural aspects that facilitate peacebuilding and conflict resolution (Galtung, 1990).

The study of cultural violence highlights how societal norms and cultural narratives can normalize and perpetuate violence, making acts of direct and structural violence appear justifiable or, at the very least, morally ambiguous (Galtung, 1990). By recognizing and challenging the cultural foundations of violence, efforts toward peacebuilding and conflict transformation resolution can be more effectively pursued to heal the wounds inflicted upon individuals, communities, and societies, fostering a more just and peaceful world (Galtung, 1990).

Recognizing the deeply embedded nature of violence, be it visible or invisible, calls for more than critique; it demands education that empowers transformation. If cultural violence silently authorizes injustice, then education emerges as one of the most vital instruments for challenging and transforming those narratives. The path toward peace is not paved only by policy, but by pedagogy, and not just in formal classrooms. In truth, any space can become a classroom, and anyone can become a teacher when there is a willingness to listen, to reflect, and to grow. It is in these everyday acts of learning and unlearning that cultural healing and coexistence truly begin. It is through these everyday encounters and lived experiences that both individuals and communities begin to transform, reshaping not only how they see the world but also how they relate to one another within it.

Peace Education

If violence can be learned, then so can peace (Byrne & Senehi, 2012). The question, then, is not only *how harm can be prevented*, but *how empathy, coexistence, and justice can be nurtured as means of prevention*. Peace education emerges as a transformative response, one that does not just treat the symptoms of conflict but seeks to address its roots (Standish, 2020). Specifically, peace education is understood as a process that promotes the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to foster behavioural change, enabling individuals to prevent conflict and violence and to build conditions for peace at multiple levels (UNICEF, 1999). It is not limited to formal instruction; it lives in conversations, community interactions, cultural exchanges, and even in the quiet decision to understand rather than judge. In a city like Mexico City, where cultural tensions often lie just beneath the surface, Peace education becomes a tool for reimagining relationships, not by erasing difference, but by cultivating respect for it. In this sense, peace education engages transformation at multiple levels: within individuals, between groups, and across the structures that shape their interactions.

In the context of Mexico City's evolving cultural landscape, peace education offers more than an ideal as it becomes a pragmatic strategy for addressing the everyday tensions that arise when diverse communities coexist. As expats settle into historically rich neighbourhoods, factors such as language barriers, assumptions of cultural superiority, and lack of local engagement can unknowingly reinforce structural and cultural violence. Peace education reframes these interactions, encouraging both locals and newcomers to become active participants in the creation of inclusive communities. Through this lens, everyday encounters become key sites of conflict transformation, where individuals reinterpret their own identities, renegotiate relationships with others, and navigate broader systems of

inequality. Every conversation becomes a potential classroom, every act of empathy as a form of teaching, and every effort to understand another culture as a step toward peaceful coexistence.

Peace education, with roots tracing back to 1890, emerged through the efforts of Dutch teacher Herman Molkenboer, advocating for international cooperation in education and steering away from nationalistic goals (Vriens, 1983). Preceding World War II, Enlightenment ideals influenced educators like Maria Montessori, who laid the foundation for peace education by emphasizing the natural laws of child development. Montessori believed that adhering to these laws in education could prevent aggression and frustration, addressing the causes of war and injustice (Vriens, 1983).

Although World War II interrupted the progression of peace education, the concept of international understanding prevailed, emphasizing global collaboration to achieve peace (Vriens, 1983). Post-war peace education focused on three objectives: addressing challenges in achieving peace, developing non-violent skills, and promoting peaceful attitudes (Harris, 2004). Today, the idea and practice has widened, and UNICEF defines peace education as a process promoting knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values for behavioural change, and preventing conflict and violence at various levels (UNICEF, 1999).

Peace education is also labelled “development education” or “conflict resolution education,” encompassing a broader understanding beyond preventing war (Harris, 2004). This diversity has led to five distinct types: international education, human rights education, development education, environmental education, and conflict resolution education (Harris, 2004). Importantly, these

approaches are not mutually exclusive; as they usually complement one another with key elements such as kindness, critical thinking, and cooperation (Harris, 2004).

Integrating peace education principles into language-learning programs and cross-cultural training offers a transformative approach to education, emphasizing empathy, understanding, and respect. According to Johnson (2021), peace education must not only equip students with analytical tools, but it must also foster personal growth, creating a space for reflection and self-transformation. Empathy, cultivated through peace education, nurtures the capacity to perceive and respect cultural differences, laying the groundwork for more meaningful connections (Standish, 2020). This foundation becomes especially vital in language-learning, where communication is not just linguistic but deeply cultural, shaping mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence across diverse communities (Johnson, 2021). This highlights how transformation begins at the level of the self but extends into the ways individuals relate to others across cultural boundaries.

With respect to language-learning, its significance in promoting cultural understanding and peace cannot be overemphasized. Learning a language beyond one's native tongue enhances the ability to empathize with different societies and cultures. Misinformation and inaccurate perceptions often fuel conflicts, but knowledge of another language enables individuals to form informed opinions and build understanding across linguistic groups (Hashmi, 2014). Language is not merely a means of communication, but it is also a cornerstone of cultural identity and empowerment, and respect for linguistic diversity is essential for peaceful coexistence, as it fosters mutual understanding and appreciation within diverse communities (Hashmi, 2014). Through this process, language learning also becomes a site of personal transformation, shaping how individuals understand themselves and others.

This respect and engagement with different languages also contribute to cultural fascination, where linguistic pluralism becomes a powerful tool in peace education. By valuing and incorporating multiple languages, peace education can deepen cultural appreciation and promote a more inclusive and harmonious global society (Hashmi, 2014). Building on the foundation that language fosters empathy and mutual understanding, cross-cultural training deepens this impact by equipping individuals with the tools to navigate complex cultural dynamics and promote inclusive, peaceful engagement. In this way, transformation moves beyond the individual, extending into how people relate to one another across cultural boundaries.

Cross-cultural training is ideally suited for incorporating peace education techniques, as it aims to bolster cultural awareness, sensitivity, and communication skills, empowering participants to navigate and thrive in diverse environments (Globibo, 2023; Johnson, 2021). Cultural competence training has been shown to enhance communication and collaboration across cultures, mitigate cultural misunderstandings and conflicts, and improve productivity and effectiveness in multicultural settings (Globibo, 2023). These processes reflect relational transformation, as individuals learn to engage differently with others in shared social spaces.

Furthermore, cross-cultural training enhances cultural intelligence development, offering various advantages when integrated with peace education strategies. It facilitates cultural adaptation by guiding participants through the process of adjusting to new cultural environments, thereby easing the transition and fostering a sense of belonging. By improving communication skills, such training reduces the likelihood of misinterpretations and encourages constructive interactions among individuals from diverse backgrounds (Globibo, 2023; Johnson, 2021). It also promotes cultural

awareness by fostering an understanding of different cultural norms, values, and behaviours, which helps cultivate respectful and harmonious community dynamics (Globibo, 2023). In addition, cross-cultural training plays a crucial role in mitigating cultural bias, encouraging individuals to recognize their own assumptions and approach intercultural situations with greater impartiality (Globibo, 2023). This shift not only reduces the influence of stereotypes but also fosters inclusive environments where individuals feel valued and engaged. As a result, communities benefit from increased morale, deeper interpersonal connections, and improved collaboration across cultural lines (Globibo, 2023). At the same time, these shifts do not occur in isolation, but interact with broader structural conditions that shape inclusion, access, and belonging.

While cross-cultural trainings were primarily designed to adapt employees to a globalized work environment where various cultures, traditions, and beliefs converge, it is worth mentioning that extending this concept to a social level would foster a better understanding of the environment in which one lives. It would also promote communication, respect, and interpersonal relationships among community members, regardless of their cultural background. However, these approaches must be understood within the wider dynamics of intercultural tension and coexistence revealed through lived experiences.

Peace education provides the tools to foster dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding, but these values must ultimately be grounded in the communities where they are practiced (UNICEF, 1999). When communities begin to change, when the corner store becomes a boutique café, or when a familiar voice is replaced by a foreign tongue, what is at stake is not just aesthetics, but a sense of belonging. These transformations are experienced simultaneously at the personal, relational, and

structural levels. Turning to the phenomenon of gentrification reveals how cultural and economic shifts reshape not only physical spaces, but also the relationships and identities that peace education seeks to protect. It is therefore pertinent to examine the forces driving this transformation, and to consider what is gained, what is lost, and who gets to decide.

Gentrification

If peace education explores how communities live together, then gentrification raises the question: who is permitted to stay, and who is slowly pushed out? As cities become more connected and commodified, neighbourhoods once rich with local memory and tradition are being transformed by global trends and economic forces (Agnew, 2020). In Mexico City, the arrival of higher-income residents, foreigners, has altered not only the skyline, but the very rhythms of daily life. What was once familiar begins to feel foreign, and what was once shared becomes exclusive. These shifts are not only spatial or economic, but deeply personal, shaping how individuals experience belonging, identity, and loss, while simultaneously transforming the relationships between those who inhabit the city. Gentrification, then, is not just about real estate, it is about power, identity, and who feels at home in their own city.

To understand gentrification in this context is to explore the layers beneath urban development. This thesis examines gentrification as both a spatial and cultural process, where privilege, policy, and personal choices converge to reshape the life of a neighbourhood. As foreign residents settle into historically Mexican neighbourhoods, their presence brings economic shifts but also cultural dissonance. Language, cuisine, customs, and values begin to bend toward new norms, often at the expense of those who have long called these places home. In this sense, gentrification

reflects not only structural transformation but also the ways in which individuals and communities renegotiate identity and belonging in everyday life. Through the lens of cultural gentrification, it becomes clear that transformation is not always neutral, and that preserving community identity requires more than tolerance; it demands awareness, responsibility, and mutual respect (Agnew, Mercer, & Sopher, 2010).

Gentrification refers to the urban transformation of neighbourhoods through state or private interventions aimed at increasing their value and appeal to higher-income groups, and this process often displaces lower-income residents, who cannot afford the rising rents and living costs (Umaña Reyes, 2023). The term was coined by Glass in 1964 during his study of the revaluation process of Victorian houses in working-class neighbourhoods in London, which began attracting middle and upper-middle-class residents. This shift reshaped the social fabric of these areas. Scholars like Smith (1996, 2000, 2001, 2005) link gentrification to the decline of the Fordist economic model, characterized by mass production and economic growth, and the subsequent economic restructuring in the global milieu (cited in Dormois, 2013). This transformation is closely tied to the rise of a new middle class dedicated to service provision and “colonizing urbanism,” which involves replacing traditional stores with upscale shops and franchises (Vila Márquez, 2017).

Gentrification typically starts with “pioneers,” often the creative class, who seek affordable rents, and their presence attracts trendy businesses, transforming the neighbourhood profile (Finsa, 2023). This process impacts local businesses, with traditional establishments such as haberdasheries and butcher shops becoming obsolete, and replaced by pet grooming salons, American-style bakeries, and upscale bars, restaurants, and cafes (Ardura et al., 2023; Vila Márquez, 2017). This transformation,

known variously as “hipsterization,” or “gourmetization,” can collectively be termed retail gentrification (Ardura et al., 2023). Gentrification also involves real estate revaluation, socio-economic changes, and civic-political adjustments to integrate the revitalized area into the city’s public space network. While individual actions such as sales, purchases, and new businesses shape the area, they collectively redefine its characteristics for new residents. These processes demonstrate how structural changes are lived and experienced through everyday interactions, reshaping both social relations and individual perceptions of place.

Culture also plays a pivotal role in gentrification. Cultural capital stimulates consumption and adds value to services and products (Checa Atasu, 2011). Residents of gentrified areas often seek spaces with heritage landmarks or a vibrant cultural heritage. Cultural heritage management and artistic presence can either contribute to gentrification or blur local culture into the global culture (Inthamoussú, 2022). Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of cultural capital plays a pivotal role in gentrification processes, intertwining with economic dynamics in revitalized urban areas (cited in Inthamoussú, 2022). The presence of cultural capital raises critical questions about which cultures are made visible, who determines cultural legitimacy, and what becomes of local traditions when redevelopment occurs without inclusive dialogue. Consequently, culture emerges as both an asset and an economic driver through tourism and the creative industries leading to cultural gentrification (Inthamoussú, 2022). Both locals and newcomers are not passive actors in this process as they are participants whose perceptions, choices, and interactions contribute to shaping evolving cultural landscapes.

Gentrification, then, is more than a shift in who occupies a space, it is a collision of values, worldviews, and lived stories (Agnew, 2020; Harvey, 2012). It reshapes not only the physical contours of a neighbourhood but the social contracts that once held communities together (Harvey, 2012). Gentrification reveals intercultural tension, belonging, and coexistence are continuously negotiated through lived experience, opening both possibilities for conflict and for its transformation. And yet, to truly understand the depth of these transformations, we must look beyond the surface.

It is essential to examine how history, economy, identity, and perception interlock to produce tension or harmony between groups. “Social cubism” offers a compelling lens, one that does not flatten conflict into a single cause but instead reveals its many interconnected dimensions (Byrne & Carter, 1996). Through this prism, the dynamics between locals and newcomers in Mexico City emerge not merely as cultural friction but as part of a complex social mosaic still in formation.

Social Cubism

If conflict is never solely about one factor, the challenge becomes understanding how its many dimensions intertwine. In a city as layered as Mexico City, where culture, class, race, language, and history intersect, the tensions between locals and newcomers cannot be explained by economics alone. Social cubism presents conflict as a linear or simplified narrative, but as a multidimensional puzzle (Byrne & Nadan, 2012). It encourages a broader perspective that considers how different social, political, historical, cultural, economic, demographic, and psychological forces interact, at times reinforcing each other, at times coming into tension, to shape patterns of intergroup interactions, belonging, and exclusion (Byrne & Keashly, 2000; Byrne & Carter, 2003; Byrne et al., 2003). In doing so, it allows for an intersectional analytical understanding of how these dynamics influence not only

structural conditions but also individual experiences and the relationships between groups. In this context, social cubism offers a roadmap for making sense of the visible and invisible forces behind cultural gentrification.

The value of social cubism in this research lies not only in its capacity to explain conflict, but in its ability to embrace complexity. In a city where the arrival of newcomers is welcomed by some and challenged by others, this framework urges a departure from reductive narratives and encourages the pursuit of deeper, more nuanced questions. Social cubism highlights that peaceful integration involves more than addressing surface-level tensions; it requires engagement with the layered histories, perceptions, and power dynamics that exist beneath the visible expressions of conflict (Byrne & Senehi, 2012). It also reveals how conflict transformation unfolds across multiple levels, shaping how individuals see themselves, how groups relate to one another, and how broader systems evolve over time. Building inclusive cities necessitates the capacity to perceive them as multidimensional, textured, and constantly evolving.

Developed by Byrne and Carter (1996), social cubism offers a dynamic and interactive model for analyzing protracted ethnic conflicts by integrating various interrelated dimensions in a conflict system, like demographics, history, religion, economics, politics, and psycho-cultural dynamics. This analytical approach recognizes the interconnectedness of these facets, underscoring their cumulative influence on the evolution of conflict in specific contexts (Byrne & Nadan, 2012). McKay (2001) highlights the versatility of social cubism, urging researchers to adopt multiple perspectives and acknowledge the dynamic interplay among factors in different contexts. The social cube metaphor

depicts conflict as a multidimensional phenomenon with six interrelated facets: history, religion, demographics, politics, economics, and psycho-cultural factors (Byrne & Keashly, 2000).

These facets interact dynamically, shaping the trajectory of conflicts over time. By assigning one of these factors to each side of the cube, the model allows for the visualization of their continuous interplay, reflecting how each dimension influences and responds to the others in constant motion (McKay, 2001). Social cubism transcends simplistic dichotomous thinking, promoting a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of conflict dynamics (Byrne & Nadan, 2012). This perspective is particularly useful for examining how lived experiences reflect broader structural and relational transformations in multicultural urban settings.

In the context of integration of newcomers into the local culture of Mexico City while mitigating cultural gentrification, the social cubism framework offers valuable insights. Through the lens of demographics, history, economics, and psycho-cultural factors, it becomes possible to understand the complex interplay between local residents, newcomers, and broader societal forces. It also helps illuminate how individuals navigate identity, belonging, and adaptation within these shifting environments, while relationships between groups are continuously redefined. Recognizing these interdependencies enables the development of more effective strategies for fostering social cohesion, preserving community identity, and mitigating the socio-cultural impacts of gentrification.

For instance, the demographic shifts triggered by the influx of foreign residents can alter economic dynamics, which in turn reshape cultural and societal interactions. Psycho-cultural perceptions, shaped by memory, identity, and belonging, further affect how these groups relate to one

another, sometimes resulting in miscommunication, distrust, or social tension. These processes demonstrate how structural changes are experienced at the human level, influencing both individual transformation and intergroup relations.

In this regard, social cubism serves as a comprehensive analytical tool to guide both research and policymaking, facilitating targeted interventions that promote inclusive urban development in Mexico City. Amidst rapid cultural change and contested urban transformations, social cubism provides a framework for embracing complexity without reducing it to binaries (Byrne et al., 2003). By accounting for history, power, perception, and emotion, this model encourages viewing cultural gentrification not as a static issue to resolve, but as a dynamic and evolving conflict ecology that must be interpreted and understood holistically. This aligns with the broader aim of this research to understand how intercultural tension, belonging, and coexistence are experienced and how they open possibilities for conflict transformation.

The inclusion of social cubism in this research is grounded in the need for an analytical framework capable of capturing the full complexity and interdependence of urban conflict. Unlike linear or reductive models, social cubism makes it possible to examine the tensions in multicultural cities like Mexico City from multiple, intersecting angles. This multidimensionality at the multimodal and multilevel not only strengthens academic analysis of internal conflict dynamics, it also humanizes conflict (Byrne & Keashly, 2000). By recognizing that tensions between locals and newcomers are shaped by intertwined historical, economic, cultural, and psycho-social factors, the framework challenges simplified narratives and invites a more ethical, empathetic approach to urban

transformation. In doing so, it bridges the gap between structural analysis and lived experience, connecting systemic dynamics with personal and relational realities.

Moreover, the interconnectedness of social cubism's six facets mirrors the lived realities of Mexico City's residents, where the lives of locals and foreigners constantly overlap and influence one another. Their coexistence is not static; it is fluid, relational, and evolving, just like the model itself. This alignment between analytical framework and social reality makes Social Cubism uniquely suited to this study. It offers not just a way to understand cultural gentrification, but a method for tracing how inclusion, exclusion, and adaptation unfold in real time. It also makes visible how transformation occurs simultaneously at the individual, relational, and structural levels. In a moment when cities worldwide are renegotiating identity and belonging, this framework provides both the analytical depth and ethical clarity needed to envision more inclusive urban futures.

Conclusion

These theoretical lenses, woven throughout this chapter, have shaped the conceptualization of identity, conflict, and coexistence within this research, and have also informed the methodological approach that follows. Together, they reveal how transformation unfolds across three interconnected levels: within individuals, between groups, and through the structures that shape everyday life. The next chapter presents an exploration of voices: the lived experiences of locals and newcomers navigating change, tension, and possibility in the streets of Mexico City.

Chapter 3: Gathering Voices, Uncovering Layers

How can the invisible architecture of a city and the layered stories that live in its streets be understood? To make sense of something as intricate as cultural gentrification, it is necessary to move beyond statistics or surface impressions. This phenomenon requires attentive and intentional listening. This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology and methods employed in the thesis: a qualitative journey built on the power of stories, conversations, and human experience. By engaging directly with both locals and expats through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, this research seeks to explore what the lived experiences and stories of locals and expats reveal about identity, belonging, coexistence, and the possibilities for transformation within Mexico City.

Methodology

Grounded theory serves as the epistemological compass, allowing insights to emerge organically from participants' voices rather than imposing predetermined narratives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). It is not about proving a hypothesis; rather, it is about understanding what participants lived experiences reveal about intercultural tension, belonging, coexistence, and possibilities for transformation. In the complex and shifting context of Mexico City, where cultural transformation moves quietly but powerfully, grounded theory offers the depth, flexibility, and empathy necessary to capture what's often left unsaid (Charmaz, 2014).

At its core, qualitative research is an invitation to explore the richness of human experience, not through numbers, but through words, images, stories, and meaning (Senehi, 2020). It is a dynamic, exploratory process that constructs and validates knowledge from a holistic perspective, emphasizing

the interconnected realities that shape a phenomenon (Babbie, 2020). Rather than isolating variables, it seeks to illuminate the complexity of social life in context, capturing not only what people say, but how they feel, interpret, and navigate the world around them (Álvarez-Gayou Jurgenson et al., 2019).

But generating stories is only the beginning, what gives them meaning is how we listen to them, interpret them, and let them speak back to theory. Grounded theory offers the scaffolding for this interpretation, allowing themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data itself (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory, serving as the methodological backbone, accentuates the induction or emergence of insights from data to formulate theories or models (De la Espriella & Gómez Restrepo, 2020). Expanding upon the seminal work of Strauss and Glaser, it acknowledges various theoretical developments or schools, delineating their distinctive features and nuances (De la Espriella & Gómez Restrepo, 2020).

Research Methods

To bring this philosophy into practice, this study turns to one of qualitative research's most evocative tools: the semi-structured interview. Positioned between structure and spontaneity, this method allows space for stories to unfold in the participant's own rhythm and voice (Senehi, 2020). It is in this conversational space, that deeper truths often emerge, giving shape to lived experience and nuance to broader social patterns. Through interviews, researchers endeavour to capture participants' perspectives, articulated in their own words, unveiling their interpretations, perceptions, and emotions (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). Such interviews offer a window into participants' thought processes, enabling an understanding of how they categorize and elucidate their actions (Tejero González, 2021).

Structured around open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in data generation. While guided by a thematic outline, interviewers wield autonomy in sequencing topics and formulating questions (Tejero González, 2021). This flexibility also allows interviewers to follow the flow of the conversation, asking new questions, offering clarification, or diving deeper when something meaningful emerges. In this way, the method becomes not just a tool, but a dynamic space of discovery, enriching both the interaction and the insights that follow (Tejero González, 2021).

With the methodology and methods in place, the next step involved identifying who could speak most meaningfully and offer the most relevant insights to the questions at the heart of this research. A comprehensive understanding of cultural transformation, both from within and beyond the affected communities, needs perspectives from individuals experiencing it on both sides of the encounter.

Participant Recruitment

To bring this research to life, twelve participants were intentionally selected, six locals and six expats from diverse nationalities, whose voices reflect the evolving urban fabric of Mexico City. All participants were between 26 and 40 years old, and lived in the neighbourhoods of Condesa, Roma, or Polanco, areas at the heart of the cultural intersections and urban transformations this study seeks to explore. For the purposes of this research, *expat* refers to an individual who resides outside their native country, typically relocated by a multinational company and subject to that company's relocation policies. This definition helps distinguish the participants in this study from other forms of migration, such as digital nomads, students, or undocumented migrants.

Both locals and expats participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are intentionally selected based on specific characteristics that align with the objectives of the study, allowing the researcher to focus on individuals who can provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Babbie, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Outreach was conducted exclusively through Facebook group communities such as *Foreigners and Expats in Mexico City* and *Niñas SOS CDMX*, online spaces where conversations about daily life, culture, and belonging are constantly unfolding. These platforms were selected due to their high levels of activity and popularity among the target age group, ensuring access to a diverse and engaged participant pool. Additionally, these groups frequently serve as spaces where current social dynamics in the city are discussed, including experiences related to housing, cultural change, and everyday interactions, making them particularly relevant for the focus of this study. Public posts invited individuals who met specific criteria, residents of central neighbourhoods affected by gentrification and willing to reflect on identity and cultural change. This sampling method enabled direct access to socially engaged participants whose lived experiences aligned closely with the aims of the study.

Participants were given the choice between in-person or online interviews. Those who opted for face-to-face meetings were interviewed at neighbourhood cafés in Roma, Condesa, or Polanco, creating a relaxed and familiar environment. In-person participants were provided with a physical consent form before the interview began, ensuring that they fully understood the research purpose, their rights, and how their information would be handled. For online interviews, a digital consent form was emailed one day prior to the scheduled conversation, along with a Zoom link. All interviews were voice-recorded via Zoom or cellphone device for transcription purposes and securely stored on the

University of Manitoba's OneShare platform, with plans for deletion five years post-completion. Conversations were conducted in either Spanish or English, depending on the participant's preference, and all non-English interviews were translated thoughtfully and accurately into English and recorded using a secure mobile device.

Demographic Overview

Beyond their demographic diversity, these twelve participants embody the living pulse of Mexico City's most emblematic neighbourhoods. The expats, coming from Chicago, India, Peru, Brazil, France, and a Mexican-American background, each carried stories of adaptation and discovery, shaped by the rhythm of urban life in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco. The local participants, in turn, reflected the city's rooted identity, carrying the weight of memory, pride, and the quiet negotiation of change. Together, they form a collective portrait of coexistence: voices meeting in cafés, kitchens, and crowded streets, capturing both the tension and tenderness that define contemporary urban belonging. The demographic characteristics of the twelve participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Demographic Overview

Participant Type	Origin/ Nationality	Gender	Age	Neighbourhood
Expat	United States	Woman	40	Polanco
Expat	United States (Mexican-American)	Man	34	Roma
Expat	India	Man	28	Roma
Expat	Peru	Woman	39	Polanco
Expat	Brazil	Man	37	Polanco
Expat	France	Man	35	Condesa
Local	Mexico	Woman	28	Polanco
Local	Mexico	Woman	31	Condesa
Local	Mexico	Woman	29	Polanco
Local	Mexico	Man	35	Roma
Local	Mexico	Woman	33	Roma
Local	Mexico	Man	40	Condesa

The participant pool embodies a balance of genders, nationalities, and neighbourhood contexts. Such diversity enriches the analysis by highlighting multiple layers of identity and belonging within shared urban spaces. Each voice offers a fragment of the larger mosaic, a reminder that gentrification is not merely an urban process, but a human experience shaped by age, memory, and place. It is important to note that the research findings cannot be generalized to the wider society due to the small sample size.

These interviews became moments of shared reflection, windows into the shifting experience of identity, belonging, and transformation in Mexico City's most emblematic neighbourhoods.

Ethics and Informed Consent

Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research and a commitment to honouring the autonomy, dignity, and emotional safety of every participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Before any interview was conducted, participants received clear and detailed information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and what participation would require. They were made fully aware of their rights, including the right to confidentiality, voluntary participation, respect and dignity, protection from harm, access to information, debriefing, and, most importantly, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without consequence.

Participants were informed that each interview would be voice-recorded using a secure mobile phone, solely for the purpose of ensuring accurate transcription, and that these recordings were securely stored on the University of Manitoba's OneShare platform and permanently deleted after five years in accordance with the University of Manitoba's ethical research standards. Participants also had the option to request a copy of their recording and were provided with their interview transcripts to review and approve for accuracy (member checking). Participants were encouraged to ask questions, seek clarification, and take the time they needed before providing their written consent. Each participant received a copy of their signed consent form for their personal records.

Crucially, participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study and to request the disposal of their data until January 31, 2025. This date was established to ensure ethical flexibility during the data generation phase while allowing sufficient time for participants to reconsider their participation. After this point, data analysis began, and findings were interpreted based on the

collective narratives of all participants, making individual withdrawal no longer feasible. Should any participant have chosen to withdraw before this date, their recording and transcript would have been immediately and permanently destroyed. This provision was designed to uphold participants' autonomy and ensure full control over their involvement and the use of their words.

In every step of this process, the goal was not only to follow the University of Manitoba's ethical standards but to create a respectful, supportive space, where people felt safe to speak, to reflect, and to be heard on their own terms.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

To protect the integrity of this research and the dignity of those who participated, special care was taken to ensure both anonymity and confidentiality throughout the interview process. Participants' names were not solicited, and all identifying details were removed from the data. Everyone was assigned a pseudonym, and these were used consistently across transcripts, analysis, and thesis writing. Before each interview began, participants were presented with a clear and comprehensive consent form outlining their rights and the objectives of the research. They were also given a copy of the form for their records.

Creating a safe, comfortable space was essential for each interview so that each respondent could relax while sharing their story with me. Participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable discussing, in their own time and in their own words. This intentional care fostered an environment of trust and openness, allowing for deeper insights, richer narratives, and ultimately, more meaningful data to merge (Cresswell & Poth, 2017).

Risks and Benefits of the Research

This research was designed with deep respect for the emotional well-being of its participants. While the interviews posed minimal risk and were intentionally non-invasive, some topics, such as identity, displacement, or cultural tension, had the potential to touch on sensitive personal experiences. To safeguard participants' emotional comfort, a list of free emotional support resources was provided prior to each interview. Throughout the conversation, the researcher remained attentive and responsive, offering space for pauses, breaks, or emotional check-ins whenever needed. Flexibility was key as the participants were empowered to set the pace, choose what to share, and guide the depth of the conversation. At its heart, this approach reflects the core values of the trauma-informed study itself: empathy, care, and the creation of safe, respectful spaces where honest dialogue could emerge.

Limitations of the Study

While interviews are a valuable method for generating rich, qualitative data, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size of six locals and six expats, limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population. Additionally, the inherently subjective nature of interviews introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may have responded based on social desirability or personal interpretation of the interview questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). The depth of insight also varied, depending on each participant's comfort level and willingness to share.

Logistical factors, such as scheduling conflicts or technical issues during recording, occasionally impacted consistency in the interview process. As in any qualitative study, the researcher's underlying assumptions and positionality may have subtly influenced both the interview

process and the interpretation of findings. To mitigate these challenges, efforts were made to standardize procedures and remain transparent throughout the research process. Another unexpected dynamic was the hesitation among some expats to speak freely when asked about challenges with Mexican culture or Mexicans. Even though they were never explicitly told the researcher's nationality, many assumed it based on my name and appearance. This dynamic required ongoing reassurance that the interview was a safe space, free from judgment, and that honesty, even when critical, was both welcome and essential.

All participants, both locals and expats, were recruited through Facebook groups, which inadvertently skewed the sample toward individuals who were socially engaged and more inclined to participate. Most of the expats interviewed did not perceive themselves as contributing to gentrification. This perspective might have shifted had the study included a broader range of foreign residents, particularly those relocated through formal corporate programs. Reaching that population proved challenging, likely due to their professional visibility and need for discretion.

Finally, with rent prices in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco rising dramatically, many long-time local residents have been displaced. By focusing on participants aged 26–40, this study may have missed the voices of older generations who have lived through the neighbourhood's transformation. Including these perspectives could have offered powerful insights into community memory, belonging, and cultural resilience. Broadening the age range of local participants is a meaningful consideration for future research.

These reflections do not diminish the value of the insights generated through the semi-structured interviews; rather, they underscore how deeply context, access, and perspective shape not only research outcomes, but the stories we are able to hear and the truths we are able to hold.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, the process of making sense of the stories began. Each conversation was transcribed using Zoom's transcription tool and then carefully reviewed for accuracy, ensuring that meaning, tone, and key expressions were faithfully preserved. From there, the data was organized thematically, sorted into major topics and emerging subtopics that reflected the most significant patterns across participant responses (Braun & Clark, 2022). The thematic approach allowed recurring themes around identity, belonging, intercultural tension, coexistence, and processes of transformation across individual, relational, and structural levels.

Keeping in line with grounded theory, insights were allowed to emerge inductively from the data itself rather than being imposed from the outset (Charmaz, 2014). By listening not just to what participants said, but how they said it, this analysis sought to capture both the substance and the emotional texture of their experiences. The goal was not simply to categorize responses, but to better understand the lived realities behind them, and to uncover what these stories reveal about the shifting dynamics of culture, power, and community in contemporary Mexico City.

Positionality and Standpoint

This research is shaped by the researcher's positionality as a Mexican woman in her early thirties, raised and educated in international environments, and currently pursuing graduate studies in

Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Manitoba. From an early age, exposure to diverse cultural backgrounds through international schooling fostered an openness toward cultural exchange and a deep appreciation for intercultural interaction. At the same time, this upbringing was accompanied by a strong sense of connection to Mexican identity, grounded in values of respect, pride, and appreciation for local traditions, customs, and community life.

These intersecting experiences informed the initial perspective brought into this research. As Mexico City began to transform, the researcher's first reaction was one of curiosity and excitement, rooted in the belief that increased global attention would allow others to appreciate the richness of Mexican culture. Over time, however, this perspective evolved into a more complex emotional response, including feelings of nostalgia and concern, as visible changes in neighbourhoods suggested a shift away from long-standing cultural practices. This shift in perception became a critical entry point into the research, shaping both the questions asked and the sensitivity with which participants' experiences were approached.

The researcher's positionality is also shaped by relative privilege, including access to higher education, multilingual abilities, and familiarity with international environments. These elements facilitated communication with participants from diverse nationalities and enabled my navigation across cultural spaces with ease. However, this same positionality required ongoing reflexivity, particularly in recognizing how proximity to globalized environments could influence interpretations of cultural change, belonging, and integration. A conscious effort was made to remain attentive to power dynamics embedded within the research process, especially when engaging with participants

whose experiences of displacement, exclusion, or marginalization differed from the researcher's own experiences.

While a brief personal context was shared with participants to establish rapport, care was taken not to over-disclose personal views that could influence participants' responses. This balance aimed to create a space where participants felt comfortable expressing their perspectives freely, without feeling guided toward a particular narrative. In addition, trust-building was approached intentionally. Participants were engaged through accessible online communities, and interviews were conducted in ways that prioritized comfort and familiarity. For in-person conversations, participants were invited to meet in neighbourhood cafés and were offered a beverage as a gesture of appreciation. Across both in-person and virtual settings, interviews were approached as conversations rather than interrogations, allowing participants to share stories of their experiences at their own pace.

Positionality also influenced the methodological process in more subtle ways. Initial assumptions regarding participants' socio-economic status were challenged during the research, particularly in relation to local residents who had lived in these neighbourhoods prior to rising costs. Recognizing these assumptions became an important moment of reflexivity, reinforcing the need to approach each participant's experience without preconceived categorizations. This awareness highlighted how power and privilege operate unevenly within the same urban space, shaping who remains, who adapts, and who is displaced.

Gender also played a role in shaping the research process. In the context of Mexico City's broader concerns around safety, four local female participants expressed a preference for virtual interviews rather than in-person meetings. This dynamic informed the flexibility of the research design and highlighted how broader social conditions influence participation and access within research settings.

Ultimately, this research is grounded in an ongoing process of reflexivity, acknowledging that the researcher's identity, experiences, and positionality inevitably shape both the interpretation of data and the meanings constructed throughout the study (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). Rather than attempting to eliminate this influence, the research embraces it transparently, recognizing positionality not as a limitation, but as a lens through which deeper understanding of cultural transformation, power, and belonging in Mexico City can emerge.

Conclusion

With the qualitative methodology and research methods laid out and a myriad of diverse stories gathered, it is time to examine the stories themselves. In the chapters that follow, the voices of locals and expats take center stage, offering deeply personal reflections on belonging, displacement, tension, and resilience.

Stories narrated in the next chapter remind the reader that gentrification is not just an economic or cultural shift, it is a daily experience, lived through memory, language, and place. What follows is not just testimony, it is a call to listen more closely to the soul of a city in motion, and to the people who are striving to remain rooted as the ground beneath them begins to shift.

Chapter 4: Between Gourmet Tamales and Picky Laundromats

This chapter brings to life the voices of six local Mexicans, aged between 26 and 40, who live in the neighbourhoods of Roma, Condesa, and Polanco, areas in Mexico City currently undergoing profound transformation due to cultural gentrification. Through their lived experiences, this chapter reveals how intercultural tension, belonging, coexistence, and possibilities for transformation are felt, negotiated, and contested in everyday life.

From a peace education perspective, this chapter not only generates testimonies but also seeks to illuminate how everyday experiences of exclusion, belonging, and adaptation can become entry points for dialogue, empathy, and social transformation. Peace education, as conceptualized by Lederach (2003) and Freire (1970), offers a framework through which cultural conflict is not merely identified but reimagined as a site of constructive encounter. In this sense, peace education allows these experiences to be understood not only at the level of the self, but also as relational and structural processes of transformation.

This analysis captures not only the participants' experiences and perceptions but also the emotional, spatial, symbolic, and cultural transformations they are experiencing. Their everyday stories reveal tensions between rootedness and uprooting, between pride and loss, between “us” and “them.” Above all, this chapter seeks to honour the complexities of Mexican identity amid ongoing urban change. Specifically, the chapter explores how Mexicans understand themselves, how the city is being reconfigured, and how everyday encounters with newcomers reshape belonging, hospitality, exclusion, resistance, and possibilities for coexistence and conflict transformation.

Knowing Ourselves as Mexicans: Between Grandma's Broth and Sunday Family Lunches

It is impossible not to know oneself as Mexican. Mexican identity is not only woven with colours, flavours, dances, and music, but also with family stories, small rituals, the tenderness of a chicken broth that heals the heart, or the chaos and comfort of a Sunday with family, where laughter, noise, and shared dishes become the soundscape of belonging. As Lucía reflected on this issue as follows:

LUCÍA: Our culture is known for being very warm and welcoming to outsiders. We love to share with the entire world, food, traditions, stories. That is who we are.

Mexican communities are recognized through everyday acts of kindness, like in tamale stands at six in the morning, in the "*provecho*" (enjoy your meal) said while passing by someone eating, and in the "*con permiso*" (excuse me) murmured when squeezing through a tight space. This warm, open, hardworking, and deeply relational identity is lived, smelled, heard, and tasted in every corner of the city. Lorena noted the following in her story:

LORENA: What I love most is the food. Everything revolves around it, birthdays, mourning, family talks. Even if you fight, you sit down to eat, and that's how things are solved. Food is definitely Mexicans love language.

Mariana also added that Mexicans tend to be very humanistic. This is what she had to say on the issue:

MARIANA: Mexicans are very human. Always willing to help. Even if we do not have much, we find ways to push forward.

Shared roots, collective customs, and symbolic relationships to space strengthen the social fabric. However, they also leave communities vulnerable to external pressures that transform these meanings.

Many participants nostalgically reminisced about old neighbourhoods where children played in the streets, neighbours knew each other, and the baker or corn vendor was part of the emotional network of the community. Lucía recalled the following in her narrative:

LUCÍA: Before, everyone knew everyone. Now, the houses are Airbnb rentals. The street looks the same, but the people are gone. It feels like a memory not a home.

This sense of belonging is also expressed through sound, like the whistle of the “*camote*” (sweet potato) vendor, the call of the scrap collector, and the bell of the sweet bread seller. These sounds are not just service calls; they build identity, memory, and a sense of belonging. Fernando reported on this issue in the following way:

FERNANDO: If you grow up here, those things are just normal. You do not even notice them... until they are gone.

The way the city is felt, through its spaces and sensations, is part of what it means to be Mexican. Public spaces are not just sites of economic exchange, as they are also symbolic and emotional anchors. Because of this deep connection to urban life, the current transformation of these neighbourhoods is not experienced as natural progress but as a process of loss; loss of who communities are, of who they were, and of who they may no longer be able to remain.

This feeling of gradual loss opens the door to how locals perceive the arrival of new neighbours and the shifting meanings of belonging.

The City Changed... and I Was Not Part of the Plan

Walking through Roma, Condesa, or Polanco today means stepping into spaces that, though they retain their historic architecture, have been profoundly transformed in their social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Behind French-style or Porfirian facades from earlier eras lie minimalist apartments, mostly occupied by young, affluent foreigners. This coexistence of old and new creates a sense of alternate reality, where visual continuity remains, but the soul of the neighbourhood has shifted. Julia noted the following in her narrative:

JULIA: It feels like living in an alternate reality where salsa is not spicy, people speak every language but Spanish, tamales⁶ cost fifty pesos instead of twenty, and restaurants only have menus in English. Before, everything felt ours, now it feels curated for someone else[s].

This transformation is evident in everyday details, from rising taco prices to the predominance of English in menus and movie screenings. As Mariana jokingly remarked, *“You have to hunt to find a dubbed movie now. Everything’s in English. It is like the city stopped speaking to us.”*

The city has begun to speak a different language, literally and symbolically. This transformation has implications beyond aesthetics or convenience as language in this context acts as a class marker, delineating access and exclusion in a society where bilingualism is the exception rather than the norm. As Fernando pointed out some interesting points in his story:

⁶ Tamales are a traditional Mexican food made from corn dough that's wrapped and steamed (Torres, 2022).

FERNANDO: Speaking English in Mexico as a local often signals upper class. It means your parents could afford private school from kindergarten. For the rest of us, it just reminds you where you cannot go.

Those without English proficiency are increasingly sidelined, even in their own neighbourhoods, reinforcing a sense of marginalization. Lucía recognized the significance of the English language class in the following way:

LUCÍA: There are many foreigners who have lived here for years and never learn[ed] Spanish. They assume everyone speaks English, and maybe in Polanco they will find someone who does, but not in other parts of the city. It creates a wall between us.

For many locals, this exclusion feels not only spatial but existential. As Fernando opined that non-Spanish speakers are excluded from participation in the culture:

FERNANDO: For those who do not speak English, it is even worse. No matter how hard they try, they just cannot belong.

Even for long-time residents, staying is increasingly uncertain. Participants agreed that living in Roma, Condesa, or Polanco today is only feasible for two reasons: One, you inherited property from previous generations; or two, the person belongs to a higher socioeconomic bracket. Otherwise, staying becomes unsustainable. Rents, food, and even the most basic services, like laundromats or bakeries, have become unaffordable. Yet exclusion in these spaces runs deeper than rising prices, it seeps into daily interactions, into who is acknowledged, who is ignored, and who the city seems built to serve. Lorena had the following to say about equating the symbolic disappearance of bread with the disappearance of Mexican people from these high-end neighbourhoods:

LORENA: There are only two bakeries left here. And bread is such a traditional Mexican thing. In other areas, there are at least six. It's like even bread is disappearing with us.

Urban space is no longer neutral, and instead of being a shared place of encounter, it has become a symbolic battleground where certain presences are welcomed, and others pushed to the margins in culture wars. Street markets, once essential to community life, now survive only one day a week as people must leave the neighbourhood to find affordable food. The change is not just confined to Roma, Condesa, and Polanco but has spilled over into surrounding areas. Mariana summed it up in the following manner:

MARIANA: It is not that you do not want to live here. It is that maybe you cannot. The neighbourhood starts to tell you: you no longer belong.

Hence, colonies like Escandón or Narvarte are beginning to experience the same process, pushing symbolic and real estate boundaries outward in all directions.

The transformation of these neighbourhoods reveals that displacement can occur without movement, and exclusion can exist without borders. As belonging becomes increasingly fragile, everyday interactions expose new forms of silence, distance, and cultural misunderstanding. What once was shared with pride now feels conditional—welcome, but not too much.

Welcome, But Not Too Much: Inclusion

The cultural transformation of neighbourhoods like Roma, Condesa, and Polanco goes far beyond architectural facades or economic shifts, as it impacts a collective identity deeply rooted in everyday practices, customs, and symbols. The arrival of high-income foreigners with different cultural

frameworks does not merely alter the urban landscape and reconfigures ideas of belonging, adaptation, and exclusion. One of the most significant tensions in this shift is language. Many local participants opined that there are foreigners who live in Mexico City for years without ever attempting to learn Spanish. As Lucia explained it in the following way:

LUCÍA: It is not that they are not nice... it is just that they have been here forever and still speak zero Spanish. That creates distance.

Mariana also added that not speaking Spanish disconnects newcomers from local community life as they do not fully immerse themselves in the culture:

MARIANA: Many foreigners, especially from India or Asia, do not make any effort to learn Spanish, even after a year. It creates frustration and a disconnection with the community.

For residents like Lucía and Mariana, the inability, or unwillingness, of newcomers to engage linguistically represents more than a communication gap; it becomes a barrier to mutual recognition and coexistence.

Participants described a clear contrast between foreigners who engage with local life and those who remain detached from it. These opposing postures shape everyday coexistence and reveal how openness, or indifference, can either strengthen or fracture community bonds. Julia revealed her thoughts as follows:

JULIA: I have neighbours who have lived here for years and still act like tourists. They do not talk to anyone. They only interact with other foreigners and eat in the same restaurants all the time. It feels like they live in a different city, even though we share the same street.

The absence of this curiosity also fosters quiet exclusion. Antonio narrated that newcomers fail to extend themselves and live on the periphery of the city's culture:

ANTONIO: We try to be friendly, but when they do not even make the effort to say hello in Spanish, it feels like we do not exist.

The difference, for many, is not about nationality as it is about attitude. For example, participants emphasized that inclusion was not determined by where someone came from, but by their willingness to participate in everyday social life, whether through small gestures of interaction, openness to local customs, or simply acknowledging those around them.

For some participants, these forms of everyday engagement, particularly through language, became a gateway to inclusion. Lorena disclosed that newcomers who learn Spanish connect with the people as the language is embedded in the culture:

LORENA: I have met foreigners who really try, they learn the language, they talk to you in the market, they ask about our traditions. That is nice, it feels like they want to be part of the place.

For several participants, public spaces and to who those spaces belong are indicative of ownership and belonging. A divide becomes visible in public spaces. Mariana articulated that restaurants, cafés, and even street food stands increasingly cater to foreigners:

MARIANA: Sometimes it feels like the restaurants are not for us anymore. You sit down, and they take forever to serve you, but the foreigners next to you get everything right away. It makes you feel invisible in your own city.

The experience of exclusion also infiltrated ordinary activities. Eating at a street taco stand, once a symbol of cultural intimacy and accessibility, has become a luxury. Tacos that once cost twenty

pesos now cost nearly double, and what was formerly an ordinary meal is now marketed as an “authentic experience” for outsiders. The meaning has not changed, but the access, and the price, has. For example, Lorena pointed out that being Mexican today can land people in trouble with the authorities as they wrongfully assume that they are up to mischievous criminal behaviour:

LORENA: My brother was visiting me from our small coastal town. I gave him my apartment keys so he could stay while I was at work. When he got back, he was trying to figure out which key opened the gate, and a neighbour thought he was a thief. They called security on him. He was not doing anything wrong; he just looked Mexican in a building full of foreigners.

Other participants recalled similar moments of everyday exclusion. Antonio highlighted that newcomers often infantilize locals and rob these local Mexicans their dignity:

ANTONIO: I once saw a man in dirty overalls waiting for tacos, and a group of tourists gave him leftover food and coins. He was not asking for anything; he just wanted to eat. He looked embarrassed. You could see it on his face. It hurt.

Still others described foreigners photographing poor children or street vendors without their consent, treating them as colourful backdrops rather than as human beings. These were not always overt acts of cruelty, but rather moments of unawareness, a failure to understand context and that ignorance, however unintentional, wounds. It exoticizes poverty, romanticizes struggle, and turns daily life into a spectacle by detached voyeurs.

These everyday acts reveal how exclusion operates not through hostility, but through indifference and ignorance revealing how relational disconnection can gradually become normalized within the social fabric. This gradual loss of mutual recognition marks the point where hospitality turns fragile.

When Hospitality Turns Fragile

Cultural gentrification is not just material; it is embedded in everyday interactions, or the absence of constructive encounters. It is symbolic displacement: the replacement of local culture with a global aesthetic that becomes the new norm. Lorena reflected that local people feel marginalized and detached from their neighbourhoods:

LORENA: It feels like it is no longer your neighbourhood, even if you still live there. Everything is more expensive, more exclusive, more... picky. Even the laundromats.

In a country like Mexico, where welcoming outsiders is often a point of pride, this shift is especially painful. Hospitality turns fragile when it is not reciprocated. The warmth that defines the local culture starts to feel one-sided. Lucía recounted how it is painful to realize that newcomers are disrespectful when they fail to return the generosity extended to them by local Mexican people:

LUCÍA: We try to explain things, even with hand gestures if needed. But it still hurts to see that they do not even try to understand us.

As hospitality turns into distance, and distance into silence, exclusion takes root in more subtle ways. What was once an open invitation to coexist now feels like an unspoken reminder of who the city is meant for, and who it is not meant for.

When Being Local, Being Excluded

Cultural exclusion does not always manifest loudly or aggressively. It often hides in small, ordinary moments. Mariana outlined in her story how local people are treated as second class citizens when it comes to how wealthy newcomers are privileged and prioritized by vendors:

MARIANA: I was in a restaurant once, waiting for my order, and a foreign customer arrived after me. He was served first. Nobody said anything, but the message was clear. You just feel invisible.

This form of structural violence, though silent and invisible, accumulates in everyday life. In Mexico City, it appears in subtle but persistent ways with locals being ignored in cafés, neighbours feeling dismissed, or long-time residents sensing that the city is no longer built for them, but for those who can afford to reshape it. Julia pointed out that local people are pushed to the margins, to the periphery of the city that they grew up in:

JULIA: Everything is for them. The menus, the prices, the treatment. And you... well, you just do not matter as much.

These experiences are not isolated events. They are symptoms of an invisible structure that generates a sustained sense of symbolic displacement. Many participants expressed that being Mexican has begun to feel like they are “the other” in the territory that generations of their families have lived in as newcomers receive privileged treatment and they do not. Lucia had the following to say on the issue:

LUCÍA: One afternoon, I was walking home, and a neighbour I had seen a hundred times looked at me as if I was lost. She asked if I was delivering something. I told her I lived there. She was surprised. That is when I realized that even if you belong, you do not look like you do anymore.

For residents like Lucía, exclusion is not always a matter of hostility, but of perception, who appears to belong, and who does not. The feeling of being pushed to the margins is not only a result of current economic forces; it is also a legacy of historical inequalities and longstanding associations between foreignness, privilege, and social status in Mexico City. When inequality and exclusion are

normalized. When inequality and exclusion are normalized, they plant the seeds for the resentment and rupture now unfolding in the city. Antonio recognized that newcomers remain ignorant of the damage their presence is causing to long time Mexican residents of the city:

ANTONIO: I do not think they mean to cause harm... but they just do not see it. They never ask what was here before, or who is being displaced.

Most foreigners who move into these neighbourhoods are unaware of the impact of their presence. They rarely question the conditions that enable their privileged integration into a city where unspoken rules increasingly prioritize the global over the local. Cultural gentrification does not require intentionality to have an effect; it operates through everyday decisions that go unquestioned, through normalized dynamics, and through systems that benefit some while muting others.

Staying as an Act of Resistance

Several participants described a persistent sense of emotional and symbolic displacement, even without having physically moved. Despite growing up, living, and remaining in these neighbourhoods, many now feel they no longer belong there. Lorena made it known that she would have to move out of the neighbourhood her family have lived in for generations if it was not for the benevolence of her grandparents, who gifted her family their property:

LORENA: I grew up here, my whole family has lived here, and I have seen how everything changed. Before, there were neighbourhood houses and local stores. Now the buildings look the same on the outside, but everything inside has changed. I would like to stay, but it is becoming impossible. If my grandparents had not left us this property, we could not live here.

Mariana echoed this sentiment. For example, Mariana said that she will have to leave the city soon as she cannot afford living there anymore:

MARIANA: I would love to stay in Mexico City, but I know that soon I will not be able to afford this rent. It makes me sad, because this is my home. Every year the prices rise, and people who have lived here all their lives are leaving.

For many long-time residents, continuing to live in these areas is no longer a privilege, but an act of quiet resistance, resistance against uprooting, invisibility, and symbolic displacement that may not come with eviction notices, but that slowly wears down people's dignity. Antonio revealed that newcomers don't understand the nuances of the culture and what it means to be a good neighbour:

ANTONIO: My neighbourhood is not the same. Now there are new people everywhere, but they do not talk to anyone. Sometimes when I try to explain things, like not leaving trash or dog mess, they do not understand me. I use gestures, but they get upset or walk away. We have many unwritten rules of how to live together, and they do not understand them.

For others, the loss of space was more than symbolic because it was material as well. Mariana recounted that the dynamic bustle of everyday life at the local levels has changed as Mexican neighbours are forced to move away:

MARIANA: People think we are lucky to live here, but it does not feel like it anymore. Every year, something closes, the bakery, the market, the neighbours move. You stay, but it is no longer the same place.

These stories reveal that for many, staying is not about comfort as it is about memory as remaining in place becomes a way of honouring family, neighbourhood, and belonging in that community. This quiet resistance challenges the invisibilization brought about by cultural and economic change, asserting that Mexican communal identity is not for sale. These forms of violence do

not strike with fists; they fracture community through indifference. They touch the very core of what it means to belong, to speak, to move, to coexist, and to live with dignity in the place once called home. In this sense, remaining becomes not only a personal decision, but a response to structural pressures that reshape who can belong and who cannot.

Chile, Mole, Arepas y Choripán: Connection

Despite the tensions, silent resentment, and exclusionary dynamics described earlier, the participants' stories also reveal that cultural gentrification is not a one-dimensional or entirely negative process. There are moments of connection that enrich both locals and foreign newcomers. Some expats make a genuine effort to learn Spanish, engage with local community life, and understand the social and cultural context of Mexico.

As Lorena observed that some newcomers want to fit in, connect with their neighbours, learn the language, and immerse themselves in the Mexican culture:

LORENA: There are foreigners who come and talk to you, ask about the neighbourhood, want to learn. It is nice, because they care about the place they live in.

Several participants emphasized that these encounters, though occasional, create spaces of mutual curiosity and empathy. Through these everyday interactions, many locals have adopted new habits and practices introduced by foreign neighbours. Lucía noted that constructive mutual encounters benefit everyone as people learn from each other:

LUCÍA: I have learned things from them too. They have made me want to try new experiences, take better care of myself, exercise more, meditate, eat better. It has been nice to share and learn from each other.

These acts of reciprocal cultural exchange highlight mutual learning and horizontal relationships as key to building intercultural empathy. When foreign residents engage with intention and openness, and when locals respond with generosity and pride, coexistence begins to take root. These moments reflect how transformation is also possible through relational openness, where difference becomes a bridge rather than a boundary.

Shared meals, cooking classes, dog walks, or even casual conversation have become small but meaningful forms of connection. For a foreign resident, it might mean learning to ask for *tacos con picante*; for a local resident, it might mean learning to make arepas or listening to different styles of music. Mariana recounted that listening to newcomers' music and eating their food build strong bonds of connection:

MARIANA: I have met Argentine and Colombian neighbours who invite you to barbecues or to listen to their music. It feels good because they want to be part of the neighbourhood. And now I even make arepas; I had never tried them before.

Such moments, though simple, build cultural bridges. Far from perceiving "Mexicanness" as something rigid or pure, participants expressed appreciation for the possibility of integrating new cultural elements into their culture without losing their own sense of identity. Fernando pointed out the importance of shared moments in cultural exchanges and how they build important connections:

FERNANDO: Mexicans love to party, and if you bring more parties, we will celebrate. What matters is that those moments mean something, that they are shared.

The key, as noted by several participants, lies in intention. When newcomers approach with humility, openness, and a willingness to adapt, Mexican residents often respond with warmth. This

reciprocity fosters mutual appreciation, even in contexts marked by inequality or change. Lucía made it known that people are different and it is really important not to generalize and paint all newcomers with the same brush:

LUCÍA: Some foreigners are really kind. They try to learn, to ask, to understand. Others not so much. But when they do try, we notice, and we open our doors to them. That is how it should be, a two-way thing.

Even those who expressed discomfort with gentrification admitted that visiting transformed areas sometimes felt like stepping into another rhythm of the city, different, but not always unwelcome. Lucía averred that she really enjoys the diversity of the city and the newcomers' vibrant cultures:

LORENA: Sometimes my friends and I go for coffee in those places just to see the people, the mix of languages. It is strange, but also beautiful. Like seeing other ways of being in the world.

These encounters do not erase inequality or displacement. However, they open small spaces of empathy, moments where a more shared and respectful city can begin to emerge. They demonstrate that intercultural contact can lead not only to intergroup tolerance but also to mutual intercommunal transformation.

Conflict Should Not be Avoided: Should be Heard, Spoken, and Transformed

Amid this complex landscape, a fundamental question arises through the lens of peace education: how can the effects of cultural gentrification be transformed into opportunities for meaningful encounter, without sacrificing community identity?

Lederach (2003) noted that conflict should not be avoided or suppressed. Instead, it should be embraced as a moment of relational transformation, a chance to rebuild the social fabric and cultivate relationships that are more just, equitable, and sustainable. Within this framework, conflict is not inherently negative as it is functional. It signals areas where attention, dialogue, and reimagining are necessary for change. Rather, it reveals opportunities for transformation across individual awareness, relational dynamics, and structural conditions.

Participants approached this idea with a mix of curiosity and cautious optimism. Several described conflict not as something destructive, but as a potential space for mutual growth. The reflections often circled back to two intertwined pathways, namely the importance of language and the creation of shared spaces for dialogue. Mariana indicated that when newcomers try to speak Spanish, they are recognizing the culture, and local people appreciate those efforts:

MARIANA: It is not about speaking perfectly. It is about showing that you care enough to try. That makes all the difference.

Similarly, Lucía believed newcomers that speak Spanish understand cultural norms and values and show their appreciation of local people:

LUCÍA: When they [newcomers] learn Spanish, they do not just communicate better. They start to understand where we come from, what we do, and why we do it.

For many long-time residents, it is not a minor gesture when a foreigner makes the effort to speak Spanish. It is a symbolic act filled with meaning, a sign of respect, genuine interest, and a willingness to belong. Lucía noted that when newcomers speak the local language, it opens the door to

their understanding not just words, but local Mexican people's ways of thinking, feeling, and narrating the world:

LUCÍA: It is easier to open up when you see they are making an effort. Even if they get it wrong, we appreciate it. You feel they respect you.

Language, then, becomes more than communication; it is a tool for coexistence and a condition for empathy and demonstrating respect. The shared connections through the Spanish language that has emotional and cognitive content means that locals and foreigners can begin to negotiate shared space, defuse misunderstandings, and build trust.

When presented with the idea of creating intentional spaces for intercultural learning workshops, community events, or informal meetings, participants responded positively. For example, Lorena described these as opportunities to move beyond complaint and towards dialogue:

LORENA: There should be more spaces to talk about this, not just complain about what is happening. If people could really listen to each other, I think things could change.

Antonio indicated that when locals and newcomers make meaningful gestures by sharing the Spanish language and community events, they cocreate new meaning and build confidence and trust:

ANTONIO: Workshops, community events, language exchanges... even small activities where people share how they live, all that could make a difference. We do not really talk to each other, and that is the problem.

What emerged from these reflections was not a checklist of ready-made solutions. Instead, participants articulated a shared vision of what could be possible if a genuine effort was made from both sides. In their words, the hope was not for one culture to dominate or erase the others, but that the

city could become the vehicle where respect, curiosity, and human connection could guide the transformation. Fernando believed that newcomers and locals have many connections that humanize each other:

FERNANDO: When we sit down and talk, you realize we are not that different. They come with their ideas, and we have ours. If both sides listen, we can learn from each other.

Peace education reminds us that when we address conflict with openness, it can become a catalyst for reconciliation. Within this reimagined vision of coexistence, dialogue is not merely about speaking; it is about understanding each other's point of view.

What emerges from these reflections is a collective recognition that understanding alone is not enough. Dialogue must take form, it must be lived, shared, and practiced. This realization opens the pathway toward the creation of spaces where coexistence can be consciously built and “the other” stops being the other.

Where “the Other” Stops Being the Other

During the interviews, the idea of creating cross-cultural trainings, not as formal workshops, but as living, participatory spaces of dialogue, was discussed. Participants agreed that such spaces could help both locals and foreigners better understand one another. Lucía noted that locals and newcomers can benefit from learning from each other:

LUCÍA: They would help all of us. For them to understand Mexico, and for us to understand what they can teach us too.

Participants emphasized that these spaces should go beyond cultural etiquette or surface-level exchange. They envisioned conversations that include the realities many foreigners overlook, the history, inequality, and silent struggles that shape everyday life in Mexico. Lorena avowed that newcomers that remain aloof don't understand the daily challenges that local people must go through and if they did, they would have more compassion for them:

LORENA: They have a very superficial perspective. If they knew the real context, they would have more empathy.

That said, Antonino recognized that if newcomers knew the local reality, they would understand local people's behaviour better:

ANTONIO: I think it would help both sides. They could learn what things mean to us, not just what they see. And we could also understand why they act the way they do.

Participants imagined that encounters built on listening, honesty, and mutual curiosity would work better rather than having newcomers exposed to traditional lectures or courses. They wanted to move beyond complaint and towards connection, to recognize that coexistence is built, not assumed. Fernando made it known that addressing conflicts constructively will build better relationships for all:

FERNANDO: If these problems have come back, it is because they were never resolved. They stayed silent, but they were always there.

What surfaced in these reflections was a shared understanding that the city's tensions are not only about space or economy, but about memory, belonging, and unresolved wounds. True coexistence, they suggested, begins when dialogue replaces distance, when stories are shared, and when "the other" starts to feel familiar.

These proposed spaces are more than cultural exchanges because they are acts of restoration. They invite both locals and foreigners to listen with empathy, to speak with honesty, and to recognize one another as part of a common social fabric. In so doing, they hold the potential to transform mere coexistence into genuine solidarity.

These conversations reveal that understanding is not a static achievement, as it is a continual practice, one built through shared stories, attentive listening, and the willingness to see beyond difference. The stories that follow are not isolated voices; they form a collective narrative that exposes both the fractures and the possibilities within Mexico City's cultural landscape.

As these voices unfolded, they began to illuminate what lies beneath the visible layers of gentrification: not only new façades and changing languages, but deeper currents of memory, belonging, and loss. What follows are the key findings that emerged from listening closely, not just to what was said, but to what was felt, remembered, and left unsaid.

Key Findings: Listening Between the Lines and What the Stories Reveal

As the participants' stories unfolded, it became clear that what is being contested in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco is far more than rent prices or accessing trendy cafés. Beneath the surface of changing façades and shifting demographics lies a complex web pointing to deeper questions of identity, belonging, memory, and dignity. These are not just stories about urban change. They are mirrors reflecting how communities understand themselves in a city suspended between the familiar and the foreign. What follows is not a list, but a map, of wounds, resistance, and possible

transformation grounded in the participants' stories. These findings reveal processes of transformation operating simultaneously at the individual, relational, and structural levels.

Nine key findings emerged inductively from the participants' stories:

First, language and everyday gestures shape belonging. The increasing dominance of English in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco is not merely a practical adaptation; it reflects a deeper layer of cultural exclusion. In a country where only five percent of the population speaks or understands English (Liendo, 2025) and where bilingual education is largely reserved for the upper classes, the normalization of English in menus, job postings, and social interactions acts as a social class gatekeeper. This shift turns the everyday language of the city into a social filter that reinforces class divides and marginalizes long-time residents in their own neighbourhoods.

At the same time, participants emphasized that small, everyday gestures, such as attempting to speak Spanish, greeting neighbours, or engaging with local customs, can significantly reshape this dynamic. These acts, though seemingly minor, carry political weight in contexts of unequal power, transforming transactional encounters into relational ones. Belonging, in this sense, is not granted by presence alone because it is constructed through intentional engagement.

Second, cultural violence and unacknowledged privilege reinforce exclusion. Johan Galtung's (1990) concept of cultural violence is useful in understanding how exclusion can occur without overt aggression. Cultural violence operates through norms, symbols, and assumptions that make inequality seem natural or inevitable. In this context, gentrification is not simply about real estate; it is about reinterpreting local culture to suit foreign tastes. The aestheticization and consumption of Mexican

identity normalizes exclusion while avoiding accountability, embedding structural violence into everyday life.

Freire's concept of "oppression without intention" (Freire, 2018) further captures the dissonance many locals experience. Foreigners often describe their relocation as a personal adventure, unaware of the systemic consequences of their presence. Participants highlighted how foreigners rarely inquire about the previous use of community space or how the community was displaced from their homes. Newcomers' ability to choose where to live, what to pay, and how to interact is shaped by their privilege. Local residents do not seek to impose guilt on the newcomers; rather they want them to become aware of what is happening in local communities. Ethical coexistence begins when individuals recognize their role within larger systems of inequality.

Third, memory must be acknowledged to prevent symbolic displacement. For long-time residents, gentrification is experienced not only as physical displacement but as a form of historical erasure. Participants spoke with pain about closed bakeries, vanished street vendors, and changed neighbourhood sounds. These memories were not presented as nostalgia but as losses of cultural memory. When a corner store disappears, so does the social interaction, shared language, and community recognition. Peace education stresses that healing requires acknowledgment of loss. Memory must be made visible, not relegated to folklore. Without this recognition, grief becomes resentment, creating further barriers to social cohesion.

Even when residents are not evicted, many expressed a profound sense of not belonging in their own neighbourhoods. Remaining in that local community place no longer guarantees inclusion;

several participants described feeling that their presence was tolerated but no longer rooted. This form of displacement without movement creates symbolic dislocation, which manifests in the emotional realm when cultural markers are erased, stories are ignored, and the local presence is quietly sidelined.

Social cubism helps us to understand how these emotional and psychological layers intersect with broader economic and political dimensions. The experience of displacement without physical movement reveals not fragility, but a tangible loss of cultural agency and recognition. Neighbourhoods are not only spaces of residence; they are repositories of meaning. When those meanings are overwritten, belonging becomes uncertain, and what remains is an enduring sense of absence within presence.

Fourth, structural violence is both material and spatially experienced. Housing dynamics privilege foreigners in subtle but impactful ways. Leases are often paid in U.S. dollars, contracts are signed by corporations, and relocation packages secure access to high-value properties. While such arrangements are legal, they exclude local residents from their own markets, turning affordability into a barrier of belonging. The economic is inseparable from the emotional, as losing access to housing also means losing community, history, and place. Peace education reminds us that ignorance can be complicit in harm. Ethical coexistence begins with recognizing how comfort for some may come at the cost of displacement for others.

At the same time, safety becomes a privilege rather than a public good. Foreign residents often cite safety as a key reason for choosing neighbourhoods like Roma, Condesa, or Polanco. However, this sense of security is not uniformly distributed. It is produced through targeted

infrastructure, such as increased lighting, private surveillance, and restricted access, that benefits some while excluding others. Safety, then, is not just a feeling; it is a resource, selectively allocated in ways that favour newcomers, creating a fragmented urban reality. As protection becomes commodified, resentment deepens among those who remain outside its reach, reinforcing social divisions and eroding the notion of community as a shared public good.

Fifth, systems of access enable presence without integration, while belonging requires time and intentionality. Foreign residents often arrive through structures and systems that facilitate their comfort and ease of access. Corporate jobs, remote work platforms, high salaries, and digital systems allow them to navigate the city without meaningful engagement. These conditions make it possible to live in Mexico City without integration. As a result, some foreigners remain within “expat bubbles,” rarely attending local events or interacting beyond service exchanges. For example, one participant noted that the issue is not the foreign presence itself, but the absence of reciprocal integration. Without a shared social fabric, neighbourhoods become enclaves rather than communities.

In addition, participants emphasized that belonging cannot be achieved instantly. Earlier waves of migration unfolded more gradually, allowing for adaptation, interaction, and mutual learning through shared schools, workplaces, and public life. There was time to build trust. In contrast, the current wave of migration is fast, digital, and capital-driven, enabling habitation without interaction. Belonging is no longer an organic byproduct of proximity; it must be cultivated through time, effort, and intentional engagement.

Sixth, cross-cultural dialogue must move beyond superficial exchange. Participants expressed frustration with superficial forms of cultural exchange that prioritize politeness or etiquette over understanding. They pointed out that diversity workshops or “expat integration” efforts often avoid the uncomfortable conversations about inequality, displacement, and privilege that define daily life in Mexico City. This critique resonates with global debates surrounding Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) programs, especially in the United States, where gestures of tolerance frequently depoliticize structural inequality instead of addressing it.

Grounded in peace education is the point that meaningful dialogue must move beyond the celebration of diversity to engage directly with power, history, and responsibility. True intercultural exchange requires listening with humility, naming privilege, and confronting the social hierarchies that shape urban coexistence. Dialogue, in this sense, is not merely about coexistence as it is about transformation, turning awareness into accountability, and difference into shared responsibility to forge a more just city for everyone.

Seventh, fear is not xenophobia, but a reflection of historical memory and layered inequalities. Local discomfort with foreign presence is often misread as xenophobia. However, participants offered a more nuanced explanation. The fear they described is rooted in historical experience, including Mexico’s selective immigration policies, the admiration of foreign aesthetics, and the repeated marginalization of local culture. This sentiment is often intensified by the fact that many foreign residents living in neighbourhoods like Roma, Condesa, and Polanco are perceived as “Western,” frequently coming from the United States, Canada, or Europe. Their presence, even if unintentional,

can reactivate longstanding social hierarchies linked to race, class, and colonial histories, further reinforced by educational systems that often center Euro-American narratives.

Further, this dynamic does not affect all Mexicans equally. While this study primarily engaged with residents living in these neighbourhoods, it is important to recognize that internal inequalities within Mexico also shape experiences of belonging. Individuals from other regions of the country, particularly those from Indigenous or rural backgrounds, have historically faced marginalization within urban centers. In spaces increasingly shaped by global and Westernized standards, these hierarchies may become even more pronounced. Although this study did not directly capture these voices, their absence points to broader structural inequalities that influence who is seen, who is valued, and who remains invisible within the city.

Many foreign residents know very little about Mexico beyond tourist imaginaries. Local people's fears, therefore, are not irrational; they are echoes of inherited and ongoing forms of exclusion. As peace education suggests, when historical tensions remain unaddressed, they do not disappear; they become embedded within social structures, shaping people's perceptions, interactions, and the conditions of coexistence.

Eight, cultural capital replaces cultural value. What is considered "authentically Mexican" is increasingly defined by outside expectations. Traditions are repackaged, cuisine is modified, and aesthetics are filtered to meet global tastes in what can be understood as "McWorld." Cultural value gives way to cultural capital, a form of social currency that privileges what can be consumed while alienating those whose identities cannot be commodified. This transformation deepens feelings of

exclusion and erodes the meaning of authenticity. Galtung's (1990) framework helps reveal how this symbolic replacement operates as a form of cultural violence; it erases the original to make space for a marketable version of it. Culture, in this context, becomes a product rather than a lived experience.

Ninth, resistance emerges as a response to unmet needs. Local people's resistance often emerges quietly, as a reflection of their discontent with the perceived disregard toward their culture. In response to displacement and exclusion, residents have turned to symbolic acts of resistance, including murals, posters, slogans, and forms of street reclamation. While these actions may sometimes appear directed at individuals, they ultimately reflect a deeper frustration with broader systems of inequality. Peace education warns against dehumanization on all sides, while also recognizing that resistance is not inherently negative, but rather a signal of unmet basic human needs (Burton, 1990). Silence, in this context, is not peace; it is the suppression of unresolved tensions and unaddressed injustice.

Cities are not only built with materials; they are constructed from memories, relationships, and emotion. When these human dimensions are ignored, memories can become contested, and as peace education suggests, what is not acknowledged continues to shape the present. The work of healing, therefore, begins with listening deeply, beneath the surface, to the silences that speak volumes.

Together, these findings offer a layered understanding of cultural gentrification. It is not only an urban process; but also, an emotional, linguistic, and symbolic transformation. By listening between the lines, what emerges is not just a critique of urban change, but a possibility: that through empathy, language, dialogue, and shared responsibility, displacement can be reimaged into coexistence, and exclusion into opportunity.

Conclusion

Cultural gentrification reproduces invisible inequalities, and it also opens up the possibility for a city that can be reimagined from a place of shared belonging. It invites a redefinition of the relationship between what is ours and what is new, between the historical and the emerging. The stories generated in this research are not simply complaints, rather they reflect a deep longing for connection, respect, and recognition, to be seen, to be heard, and to share one's identity authentically. They also reveal a collective conviction that coexistence is not only possible, but also necessary.

That said, peace education teaches that language learning and cross-cultural training are not quick fixes. However, they offer viable tools to foster more equitable and empathetic ways of living together. Rather than enforcing a singular identity, these practices create room for dialogue and mutual transformation, while also helping preserve local culture and memory. For example, one participant noted that, *"We recognize ourselves as Mexicans in constant transformation. And that recognition is what allows us to adapt, to learn new ways of seeing the world, and to embrace change, alongside the people who come with it."*

Chapter four has shown that while integration does not occur automatically, it can be cultivated. Peace education tools, particularly language learning, dialogue, and intercultural awareness, can plant the seeds of shared belonging in a city that is changing by the day. The narratives shared by long-term residents in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco reveal an uncomfortable truth, namely that exclusion does not always manifest itself through force. Sometimes, it arrives with a friendly smile, an international credit card, and a rental app. For example, a respondent pointed out that, *"It is not the change itself... It is who the change is for. Because it feels like it is no longer ours."* These narratives

reveal that transformation is not linear, but unfolds across personal experiences, relationships, and the structures that shape everyday life. The city is evolving, but who is it evolving for? What happens when those who arrive do not speak the language, do not understand the context and culture, and do not question their privileges? Is Mexican hospitality still assumed to be infinite, unconditional, and automatic? The next chapter begins to explore those questions. It shifts the lens to the voices of those who have arrived, not to blame them, but to challenge all of us to listen deeper. Because understanding cultural gentrification requires viewing it from every angle, especially from those who rarely stop to reflect on their own position in the process.

Chapter 5: The Privilege of Not Knowing

Chapter four ended with an uncomfortable but necessary invitation to truly listen to those newcomers who arrive in Mexico City with another language, another set of codes, and another kind of privilege. Chapter five accepts that invitation and turns it into a direct exploration of how newcomers experience Mexico City, and what their lived experiences reveal about intercultural tension, belonging, coexistence, and possibilities for transformation. Six foreign residents, aged 26 to 40, participated in this study. All currently live in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco neighbourhoods that are undergoing rapid transformation due to the increasing influx of global residents. Each arrived in Mexico City through similar pathways like professional relocation, corporate mobility programs, or transnational work opportunities that placed them, along with their privileges and uncertainties, within one of the most unequal yet vibrant urban contexts in Latin America.

The participants represented a wide geographical range, including Brazil, the United States, France, India, Peru, and one from a Mexican-American background. While their countries of origin varied, they all shared one key experience like arriving in Mexico not by chance or tourism, but through global systems of labour and capital that shape who moves, who stays, and under what conditions. Their stories unveil the intersections between adaptation and comfort, empathy and distance, belonging and privilege. These experiences unfold across individual, relational, and structural dimensions, revealing how transformation is negotiated at multiple levels.

Their stories offer insight into how power, language, and cultural perceptions interact in everyday life. They invite reflection on what it means to “arrive” in a city already marked by historical and class asymmetries and symbolic wounds. What does it mean to inhabit Mexico City as an expat?

How is local culture perceived from that vantage point, and what tensions emerge between integration and preservation? The narratives that follow illuminate not only how foreigners perceive and experience the city, but also how their presence refracts the complex realities of coexistence in a gentrifying Mexico City. Specifically, the chapter explores how participants first encountered Mexico City and navigated their initial experiences of arrival, survival, and disconnection; how language, silence, and everyday cultural codes shaped their sense of belonging; how discomfort and vulnerability became central to their process of learning and transformation; how hierarchies of identity and privilege operate both within and beyond migrant communities; and finally, what participants came to understand only after living in the city from within.

Arriving in the Unknown: First Encounters, Survival, and Disconnection

Before the plane even touches down, Mexico City already imposes itself on the visitor. Through the airplane window, what appears is not a skyline, but an endless sea of concrete, red rooftops, and vehicles frozen in traffic. The city seems to go on forever; from the sky, it is already overwhelming, awe-inducing, and alive.

The six expats interviewed arrived under varied circumstances, yet they all shared a common initial reaction of awe at what they were witnessing. This response extended beyond the city's massive size or human density; it reflected the magnitude of what arrival meant for each of them. All participants relocated through corporate mobility programs, positioned as skilled professionals within a rhythm of life that was entirely unfamiliar. There was excitement, but there were also uncertainty, expectation, and anxiety. Rishabh described his first encounter with striking honesty, as he knew very little about the city or the country:

RISHABH: When they offered me the assignment in Mexico... I just went silent. I did not know much about the country. I was not even sure where it was on the map. But I said yes.

For many, the shock of arrival did not end at the airport. It resurfaced during the first walk through the neighbourhood, the first bureaucratic errand, or the first confusing conversation in Spanish. Mexico City, with all its contradictions and beauty, does not wait for newcomers to catch up; it compels them to react quickly. The process of “catching up” entails far more than logistics; it requires decoding unspoken norms, navigating layered social hierarchies, and confronting one’s own assumptions about culture, class, and privilege.

What these stories reveal is that beyond professional titles and residential zip codes lies a deeper reality: arriving in Mexico City means stepping into a landscape that imposes its own codes, silences, and emotional textures. It is not a city that accommodates instantly; it is a place that demands presence, resists shallow integration, and gradually reshapes. These early encounters mark the beginning of self-transformation, as newcomers confront unfamiliar realities and begin to renegotiate their sense of identity, belonging, and place.

Arriving in a new country always involves an adaptation curve, and for the expats interviewed, that curve was often steeper than anticipated. Despite having logistical support and financial benefits, many described their first days not as a process of integration, but of survival. Without spaces to reflect, connect, and feel psychologically secure, even relocation for privileged newcomers can produce emotional isolation and heightened vulnerability. Christine fully captures the initial shocks of relocation:

CHRISTINE: During the first few days, I was afraid to go outside. I did not know how to ask for things. I felt clumsy. I ended up going to Starbucks or Walmart... at least there, I understood how everything worked.

This reaction is not uncommon. When faced with a completely new environment, language, customs, and social codes, the instinct is not to settle in, but to seek protection, as newcomers experience culture shock. People search for safe spaces, recognizable brands, predictable routines, and others who speak their language. These spaces offer comfort and familiarity yet also create what many described as an “expat bubble,” an invisible barrier that protects as much as it isolates them from local people. In this way, structural conditions that facilitate comfort can simultaneously limit relational engagement with local communities.

These experiences reveal a recurring paradox as familiarity in a foreign land can soothe, yet also separate newcomers from meaningful engagement with local communities and everyday cultural life. Global symbols such as Starbucks or English-speaking enclaves provide a sense of safety but can delay newcomers’ genuine engagement with the local environment. What begins as staying in one’s comfort zone can quietly evolve into disconnection, a subtle form of isolation that limits newcomers’ integration and mutual understanding.

Several participants admitted that, despite being formally relocated to Mexico, they arrived knowing very little about the country. Their knowledge did not extend beyond stereotypes or occasional news headlines. More importantly, they lacked cultural literacy, such as how to greet

people, how to interpret an “*ahorita*”⁷, or even how to cross the street. For example, Karla noted that walking on the footpaths was an art form:

KARLA: I did not know that walking on the sidewalk was an art form. You have to dodge trees, potholes, dogs, street vendors... and at the same time, watch your purse.

Her words encapsulate the sensory and cognitive overload of arriving in a city that resists simplification. What may appear as mundane to locals like walking, shopping, and greeting, becomes a daily negotiation for newcomers who must decode the unspoken logic of urban life.

These stories reveal a clear pattern that the need to adapt is immediate, and the tools to do so are not always accessible. Some participants were fortunate to receive support from coworkers or local friends. Others experienced a far more solitary process, where every misstep became an improvised lesson in cultural decoding. Belonging does not occur by decree, and living in a place is not the same as inhabiting it. To truly inhabit a place requires more than a residency permit or a company-sponsored lease; it requires connection, presence, and a conscious effort to engage with the world around. More importantly, it demands a shift from mere survival to meaningful participation in the local community.

Adapting to a new culture is a bit like watching a film with poorly translated subtitles. The general storyline becomes clear, yet the nuance is lost. One may sense the moment to laugh, and not fully understand why, as emotions are present, and not entirely shared. This metaphor reflects how several expats described their first months in Mexico City, a period marked by a sense of presence

⁷ In Mexican Spanish, “*ahorita*” is literal translated to “right now” and can sometimes mean right now, in a minute, soon, tomorrow or whenever I feel like it (Na'atik Mexico, 2024)

without full connection. Despite holding residency, employment, and daily routines, many felt detached. Christine captured this sense of disconnection as follows:

CHRISTINE: You might walk your dog through the park, shop at the supermarket, sit at cafés... and yet still not really be there. Because inhabiting a place requires more than physical presence. It requires understanding.

This sentiment was echoed by other participants. João, for instance, described a similar detachment and feeling like an outsider. This is what he had to say on the issue:

JOÃO: I go out, I work, I see people, but sometimes I feel like I'm behind glass. I'm there, but not really part of it.

At the same time, however, Louis noted that he did not fit in because he was not on the same cultural frequency as local people:

LOUIS: It makes you invisible. It makes you small. Not because people are unkind, but because you are out of sync. Like everyone is speaking on a different frequency, and you cannot quite tune in.

These experiences reflect how belonging is not automatically granted through presence but must be constructed through relational and cultural engagement. For those who arrived in Mexico City without proficiency in speaking the Spanish language, integration was not only delayed, but it was also disorienting for them. Their inability to speak the language created logistical barriers as well as emotional distance. Rishabh described the anxiety of everyday interactions in social settings and ordering groceries at a local store:

RISHABH: They invited me, sure... but I was not enjoying it. And they could tell I was not enjoying it. It was uncomfortable for everyone. I remember the anxiety of ordering

something simple at a store, the fear of mispronouncing a word, the silence when everyone else was laughing, and I had no idea why.

Others pointed out the moments where cultural codes compounded their sense of estrangement. João, reflecting on one such misunderstanding, of how he used nonverbal gestures that were considered rude and cultural taboos that he was unaware of as he wasn't fully immersed in the culture:

JOÃO: I realized, much later, that people felt uncomfortable when I pointed... but no one ever said anything. They just gave me strange looks. I kept doing it until someone finally told me it was considered rude for Mexicans.

These stories demonstrate that integration extends far beyond language acquisition. One must learn to read nonverbal cues, interpret pauses, and navigate silences. Understanding that “*ahorita*” might mean “in five minutes” or “never,” or that “*qué bárbaro*”⁸ can express either admiration or disapproval, requires deep cultural sensitivity. Sometimes a smile means warmth, and other times it means distance. A smile may also denote indifference or hostility, depending on the context. Language, in this context, is more than a tool; it is a bridge, and even imperfect efforts to speak Spanish were consistently received by locals with appreciation. Mariana noted that the efforts to speak Spanish were fully appreciated by local people as she tried to belong and connect with those individuals:

MARIANA: You feel the effort. The respect. The intention to belong. Even if the grammar is wrong, it matters.

Even small breakthroughs, like understanding a joke, giving directions in Spanish, or recognizing what *ahorita* truly means, were described by participants as moments of joy and

⁸ Mexican Spanish phrase for a surprise reaction, depending on the context could be as “awesome” or “terrible”.

accomplishment. These glimpses of comprehension marked a turning point as the shift from the newcomers merely surviving to actually belonging in the local community. As language barriers began to fade, many participants described feeling a subtle and profound change in how they experienced the city. They were no longer just navigating its rhythms, as they were participating in them.

Creating these connections becomes essential for newcomers so that they can fit in. Peace is not sustained solely by local politics, as it is constructed through everyday practices and shared experiences. Language learning, then, becomes a sign of newcomers' willingness to understand, to relate, and to engage, not merely to coexist in the space. To inhabit without understanding is to move through the city with eyes open and their hearts closed. Yet when the subtitles begin to fade, when gestures, jokes, and rhythms begin to make sense, foreigners stop observing the story from the margins and begin participating in it.

Rishabh summarized this transformation from outsider to participant in the following way:

RISHABH: I used to feel like I was watching the movie. Now, I am starting to feel like I am the lead actor.

These experiences show that understanding does not arrive all at once, nor is it guaranteed by time alone. It is built gradually, through moments of confusion, effort, and recognition that accumulate over time. As what once felt distant begins to make sense, newcomers shift from observing the city to engaging with it, not as outsiders trying to adapt, but as participants learning how to move within its rhythms.

Feeling Out of Place: Learning Through Discomfort and Transformation

Learning a new culture can be uncomfortable, disorienting, and even humiliating. Yet, within that discomfort lies the seed of one's self-transformation. Change does not happen in grand, cinematic moments; it emerges in the small, daily frictions, misreading a joke, arriving on time, and waiting half an hour, or whether a “*si*” really means yes or is a polite refusal.

Louis captured this complex process succinctly in the following example of “Mexico City time”:

LOUIS: In my country, if you say 11:00, it means 11:00. Here, it could be 11:15, or 11:30... at first, it drove me crazy. Now I have learned to let go of the clock.

Such moments illustrate how self-transformation unfolds through the unlearning of deeply ingrained cultural assumptions. These lessons are not taught in orientation manuals. They emerge through mistakes, misunderstandings, and social missteps that may be laughed about later, yet in that very moment can erode a newcomer's confidence. Louis recalled one such experience that revealed how even simple gestures carry complex cultural meanings; he explained it as follows:

LOUIS: I remember going on a date and suggesting we split the bill. Back home, that is totally normal; it means respect and equality. But she looked really uncomfortable, almost offended. I did not understand at first. Later, I realized that here, it felt like I was being rude or that I did not want to take care of her. It was not about money; it was about manners.

What Louis experienced in his culture as fairness was, in this context, interpreted by the young woman as discourtesy. The incident, though seemingly trivial, captured a deeper truth that social norms are place-specific, and understanding them requires more than goodwill. It demands unlearning

past practices, approaching others with humility, and having a willingness to release one's own cultural defaults.

Rishabh, reflecting on his gradual adaptation to the city's culture, added humor to his process of self-transformation:

RISHABH: My sister says I am not Indian anymore. That now I even put on cologne and dress up just to be home.

Though expressed humorously, Rishabh's comment reveals a deeper process of self-transformation. Many participants expressed that, over time, their habits, gestures, and even ways of thinking shifted subtly, not always by conscious effort, but through their lived experience and emotional recalibration. Meaningful integration does not occur through avoidance of conflict, but through the willingness to face cultural discomfort and reframe one's identity in the process. This kind of learning unsettles what once felt like "common sense", a concept often shaped more by cultural conditioning than by universality.

Ultimately, the emotional journey of cultural adaptation challenges deeply held assumptions, while it also creates space for new ways of being in the world. For example, the participants described that what once felt foreign slowly became familiar to them. Over time, and through opening up their vulnerability to the unknown, connection emerges, not in spite of cultural discomfort, but because of it.

Yet, this process was not experienced in the same way by all participants. While most participants described cultural learning as a gradual and transformative process, some also encountered

more complex intersections between adaptation and identity. Gender expectations, for instance, often travelled across borders, shaping how participants were perceived and treated in everyday life.

Karla shared how these assumptions surfaced in subtle yet persistent ways. This is what she had to say on the issue:

KARLA: People kept asking what my husband did. They assumed I was the ‘trailing spouse.’ I realized that even though I came here for work, people still saw me through the lens of being someone’s wife.

Her experience illustrates how patriarchal expectations can quietly undermine women’s sense of autonomy, even in professional relocation contexts. Similar dynamics affected other participants, who reported that cultural adaptation was often complicated by gendered assumptions about safety, family roles, and independence. These reflections expose how integration is never purely cultural; it is also deeply shaped by unjust social structures that cross borders and reconfigure belonging. These dynamics reveal how structural inequalities travel across borders, shaping both individual experiences and relational interactions.

After months or years of living in Mexico City, different participants revealed that their greatest self-transformation had less to do with the city itself and more to do with what they discovered within themselves. They learned how to navigate the metro or decode street food, and how to navigate discomfort, reframe assumptions, and recognize the quiet lessons embedded in everyday encounters with local people. Diego noted that learning people’s rhythms takes time and a certain amount of openness. This is what he had to say on the issue:

DIEGO: I thought learning Spanish would be enough. But no. You have to learn to listen. To observe. To wait. It is not just about speaking the language but understanding the rhythm of people, the pauses, the silences, the gestures. That takes time. That takes humility.

Over time, it became clear that the most difficult aspect of adaptation was not the traffic, the language, or the spiciness of the food, but understanding how to truly belong. The essentials, human connection, cultural understanding, and the ability to simply be, are not found in any resource guide. Louis reflected on this process as follows:

LOUIS: I wish I had known that mistakes were not failures, but part of the process. That messing up did not mean I did not fit in. It meant I was starting to understand. Every awkward silence, every confused look, was a step forward, not backward. I was learning without knowing it.

Louis's reflection demonstrates how vulnerability and imperfection can become pathways to connection. Integration unfolds not through certainty, but through the newcomer's capacity to remain open when comfort fades.

When asked what they wished they had known before arriving in the city, participants' responses were diverse yet profoundly revealing of their emotional learning. For example, Diego reported the connections between food, stories, and memories and the shared embrace of the culture's hidden meanings:

DIEGO: That food is not just about flavour. It is about history, home, and conversation. When someone offers you food, they are offering you a story. I did not understand that at first.

Rishabh, on the other hand, indicated that politeness is deeply embedded within the Mexican culture. This is what he had to say:

RISHABH: That here, you say good morning before you ask the question. I learned that politeness is not formality—it is respect, a way of acknowledging presence.

Similarly, Louis highlighted that silence could have different meanings in the culture and one must be attuned to each nonverbal cue:

LOUIS: That in Mexico, silence speaks volumes, and you have to learn how to hear it. Sometimes silence is disagreement, sometimes it is politeness, sometimes it is peace. I learned that you have to pay attention to it.

That said, Karla believed that it was critical for newcomers to continually fail and be open so that they can learn from their mistakes and become part of the local community:

KARLA: At first, I felt like I was failing at everything. I was frustrated. Now I understand I was learning, and that learning, in another country, also means learning how to be vulnerable. You cannot protect yourself from every misunderstanding—you just have to keep trying.

Taken together, these reflections reveal how understanding unfolds gradually through small, often uncomfortable lessons. Integration implies stepping closer, transforming, adjusting, and adopting, while also honouring what is already present. In simple terms, it becomes a form of love. A love for others, for their culture, their history, their differences, and for the possibility of coexistence without erasure.

The stories shared here uncover deeper lessons about power, presence, empathy, and people's transformation. They illuminate that listening is not a passive act but an ethical and deep act, that carves out an opening through which people can coexist.

These reflections also point to a deeper complexity that resists simple explanations. As Lederach (1997) argues, transformative change in deeply rooted conflicts requires relational awareness rather than technical solutions. Within the gentrification process unfolding in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco, there are no clearly defined victims or perpetrators. Both locals and foreigners, under different pressures, may simultaneously experience harm and contribute to it. Market logic rewards exclusion when it aligns with language, aesthetics, or globalized privilege. What benefits some, such as corporate leases or pricing in a foreign currency, can become a form of harm for others. While some foreigners arrive unaware of these dynamics, locals often witness the reshaping of their neighbourhoods without being consulted. The economy becomes symbolic, and belonging is disrupted.

Despite the differences, the mistakes, the tensions, and the awkward silences, something begins to shift over time. It does not happen all at once or overnight, but it does happen. Some participants noticed the change the first time they managed to tell a joke in Spanish, and everyone laughed. Others recognized it when they were invited to a family meal and taught how to make tortillas, flipping them in the air by hand. For example, Louis learned the art so well that, after being away on vacation and not visiting for weeks, the taco vendor noticed his absence:

LOUIS: I knew I had become a “*chilango*”⁹ when the taco guy asked why I had not come by in weeks for my chorizo ones.

Diego shared a similar experience of fitting in by bringing desserts to his friends’ parties:

DIEGO: At first, I only knew other foreigners. Now I have Mexican friends who scold me if I show up without dessert or sweet bread.

⁹ Mexican Slang demonym for natives of Mexico City.

These moments, simple yet full of richness, mark a deeper shift, namely the emergence of a genuine connection between locals and newcomers. Belonging is not about perfect verb conjugations or knowing which “*taquería*”¹⁰ stays open late on Fridays. It is about being seen, and choosing to see others, too. This self-transformation rarely announces itself. Instead, it settles in gradually, in a greeting that no longer feels rehearsed, in a corner store where your name is remembered, in the flavour of chili that no longer feels overwhelming.

Christine summarized this self-transformation in the following manner:

CHRISTINE: Maybe there is no clear moment when you stop being a foreigner. But one day, someone asks about your future... and you realize you cannot picture yourself anywhere else but in Mexico City.

These stories illustrate a crucial process, namely the movement from cultural tolerance to cultural intimacy. These are not moments of passive coexistence; they are expressions of mutual recognition. They show that self-transformation is not only possible but already underway, often in small and unexpected ways.

Belonging, then, is not a destination; it is a practice that is built, tortilla by tortilla, laugh by laugh, day by day. Within these ordinary acts lies the foundation of coexistence, the slow construction of peace through daily gestures of empathy, recognition, and shared humanity. These everyday practices reflect relational transformation, where mutual recognition gradually replaces distance.

¹⁰ *Taqueria*, Spanish word for Taco Restaurants.

Walking on Uneven Ground: Power, Privilege, and Belonging

The dynamics described thus far resist simple interpretations. Some foreigners were also affected by inflated markets or exploitative practices, revealing that the impacts of cultural and economic transformation are not always unidirectional. The cycle sustains itself, blurring clear lines of responsibility between those who benefit and those who are displaced. Context, therefore, must remain central to this analysis, providing the ethical and structural frame through which the following discussion of power and privilege should be understood. Within this context, privilege operates not only as an individual condition, but as a structural force that shapes access, belonging, and everyday interactions.

Saying “foreigners” flattens a deeply diverse reality, as not everyone who arrives in Mexico starts from the same place, geographically or symbolically. Some come with generous relocation packages, accompanied by their families, supported with housing, schooling, and legal assistance. Others arrive with more modest support, and there are those who, regardless of the benefits received, carry prior experiences of migration, discrimination, or partial belonging.

There are also migrants who, while born outside of Mexico, share cultural, familial, or linguistic roots with the local population. This was the case for Diego, a Mexican American who grew up in the United States in a Mexican family. He spoke fluent Spanish and was familiar with many customs before arriving in the city, but that did not protect him from moments of feeling discomfort and exclusion, even from other foreigners. Diego explained his experience of culture shock and aloofness from other newcomers in the following manner:

DIEGO: My Spanish was excellent, but not at the level of telling jokes or making wordplay. Sometimes I had to Google what people had just said to me. I have felt less welcome in some situations with other foreigners in Mexico City. They treat me differently until they hear me speak English.

Diego's story shows that sharing a cultural background does not eliminate the need to adapt to new circumstances. Integration is not automatic, even for those who arrive with cultural proximity.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who face not only cultural barriers, but also racial and symbolic ones. Rishabh is from India, and he shared with me the persistent stereotypes and subtle prejudice he encountered when he arrived in the city:

RISHABH: People think India is dirty, or that all men there are sexist. One time, someone even asked me if we had shopping malls in my country.

In some cases, these assumptions even affect newcomers' access to housing. According to several participants, when landlords learn that a prospective tenant is Chinese, hesitation or outright rejection to let an apartment sometimes follows, not because of individual behaviour, but because of generalized and racialized perceptions. Christina recalled that some landlords use stereotypes when interacting with Asian newcomers in the city:

CHRISTINA: Some landlords just say no when they find out someone is Chinese. They assume things, they do not want too many people in the apartment, or they think it will be dirty. It is all based on stereotypes.

These experiences illustrate how racism and symbolic violence often operate through the unspoken rules that determine who gains access to space, and who does not. Such exclusions may not involve direct confrontation, yet they leave lasting trauma on the lives of those who experience them.

Together, these stories highlight how identity, nationality, race, language, and class intersect to shape the experience of newcomer integration in Mexico City. They also reveal internal hierarchies within the expat community itself. Some are perceived as sophisticated or as “value bringers,” while others are met with suspicion or condescension, even when all share the same migrant label. These unspoken rankings mirror broader global inequalities and reflect the uneven distribution of value assigned to different bodies, cultures, and origins.

When the word “privilege” is mentioned, it often evokes something visible like a high salary, a car, or a penthouse in Reforma. Yet the most insidious form of privilege is the kind that remains unseen. It is the ease of moving through a city without needing to explain oneself, of occupying spaces without question, or of receiving local people’s smiles without having earned their trust.

Several participants reflected on this subtle form of soft power. Louis described his relocation experience as unsettling, especially as he didn’t speak Spanish:

LOUIS: I did not think my presence could be upsetting. I was just coming to work... I did not even speak the language.

João also pointed out that all his needs were provided for except for learning how he was going to fully immerse himself in the local culture and fully integrate into the society:

JOÃO: In my case, everything was taken care of, house, school, driver, paperwork. They told me [to] “Just show up and start working.” But no one said anything about how to actually integrate.

This kind of privilege of ignoring context is subtle, but deeply powerful as it allows newcomers to enter a country without engaging with its history, culture, social fabric, or inherited

wounds. This ‘privilege of not knowing’ allows individuals to participate in systems of inequality without necessarily recognizing their role within them. Diego later realized as he developed cultural knowledge, why food processes were exorbitant in the supermarket and why some neighbours appeared unfriendly:

DIEGO: I did not feel like part of the problem... until I started to understand why prices were so high, or why some neighbours did not greet me.

Moving through a place without wondering who lived there before can also be a form of displacement, even if it is symbolic. Especially when the systems are designed to welcome newcomers with comfort which is layered upon the discomfort of others, then conflict does not disappear; it simply becomes invisible.

Christine reflected on this paradox with a simple observation about why restaurant menus are in English and not in Spanish or in both languages. This is what she had to say on the issue:

CHRISTINE: There are entire menus in English. We are in Mexico. Why is Spanish not listed first?

Other participants voiced similar unease once they began noticing how their comfort was intertwined with inequality. Karla reflected deeply on the hidden labor and structural disparities that sustain newcomers’ comfort due to the hard work of local people, while newcomers remain removed from interpersonal violence that often engulfs poorer neighbourhoods:

KARLA: I loved how easy everything felt at first—deliveries, housing, service. Then I realized that this comfort exists because someone else is doing the hard part. That was difficult to accept. I live in a very safe area, even safer than my home country, but it still feels strange. I keep reading about femicides, and it shocks me that such violence can

exist so close and yet feel so distant from my daily life. It makes me think about how privilege works—how some of us get to feel safe because others do not.

Her reflection exposes one of the most complex dimensions of privilege, namely its ability to coexist with violence while remaining invisible to those who benefit from it. Safety, much like comfort, is not distributed evenly; it is a resource tied to class, geography, and gender. Within the same city, some walk freely while others calculate risk at every step.

Rishabh also described this moment of awareness that the unfair economic system privileges him while taking advantage of local workers who are paid less:

RISHABH: When I saw my rent was more than what some locals earned in a month, it hit me. I was not trying to take advantage, but I was part of a system that does.

These reflections show how privilege often operates silently, until daily interactions make its imbalance visible. Many participants did not identify as gentrifiers and felt they were doing the right things, learning the language, trying local food, and being kind to neighbours. Yet as their stories suggest, goodwill alone does not ensure a deep connection. Adaptation is not the same as integration, and speaking Spanish does not necessarily mean someone is truly listening to you.

Deep listening, as participants came to understand, is not only about language because it is also about awareness. It begins with the humility to see one's own comfort as part of a broader social story, one that includes both newcomer welcome and local people's displacement.

Many participants began to wonder what might have been different had they known more about the culture, the city, and their own positionality before arriving. From this awareness emerged reflection, the quiet realization that understanding often comes late, yet it still carries meaning.

What Becomes Visible Over Time: Key Findings from Lived Experience

The dynamics described thus far resist simple interpretations. Some foreigners were also affected by inflated markets or exploitative practices, revealing that the impacts of cultural and economic transformation are not always unidirectional. The cycle sustains itself, blurring clear lines of responsibility between those who benefit and those who are displaced, a dynamic consistent with the relational nature of conflict described by Lederach (1997). Context, therefore, must remain central to this analysis, providing the ethical and structural frame through which the following findings should be understood.

Four interrelated findings emerged inductively from the data, each encompassing multiple dimensions of the integration experience. Rather than existing in isolation, these findings reveal how structural conditions, emotional processes, and historical forces intersect to shape the ways newcomers and local communities experience belonging, displacement, and coexistence. These findings reveal how transformation unfolds simultaneously at the level of the self, in relationships between groups, and within the broader structures that shape urban life.

First, corporate structures and the illusion of integration emerged as a finding. Corporate comfort can lead to cultural disconnection for newcomers. Most newcomers arrived in Mexico City with comprehensive relocation packages that included housing, transportation, and access to

international schools. Yet nearly all participants expressed that something essential was missing from the relocation process, which averaged USD \$77,000 per employee (Xpath.global, 2025). Few companies provided cultural orientation or language support to newcomers and their families. This oversight represents a structural gap and a missed opportunity to foster genuine connections between newcomers and local communities from the very beginning. Corporate relocation tends to prioritize logistical ease over emotional and cultural adaptation, reducing integration to a checklist rather than a process of belonging. Supporting newcomers, therefore, requires not only financial investment but also the intentional creation of cultural spaces for reflection, dialogue, and community engagement from the moment of arrival.

Closely related to this point is that participants pointed out that language alone was not enough to ensure integration, as much of their learning occurred through trial and error. Although language was often perceived as the key to belonging, participants quickly discovered that fluency did not guarantee connection. Even those who spoke Spanish well described persistent feelings of disorientation and social distance. What ultimately fostered deeper engagement was not linguistic mastery, but emotional and relational fluency, the ability to interpret nonverbal cues, navigate silence, and respond with cultural sensitivity. For many, this learning unfolded through repeated interaction, where mistakes became informal yet powerful lessons. In the absence of structured, empathetic onboarding processes, newcomers were often left to navigate cultural adaptation in isolation, transforming each misunderstanding into an improvised learning experience. This reveals the need for more intentional and reflective approaches to integration that recognize cultural learning as both cognitive and emotional labour.

Participants also emphasized that belonging requires mutual recognition. Inclusion did not emerge through formal procedures or institutional structures, but through everyday moments of human connection. Being greeted by name at a local market, receiving an invitation to a family gathering, or being gently corrected in conversation carried more meaning than any official program or policy. These interactions demonstrate that belonging is not a procedural outcome, but a relational achievement, built through small, reciprocal gestures that affirm one's presence within a community. While structural integration may provide access, it is recognition that ultimately sustains connection.

Second, learning through discomfort and the emotional pathways to belonging was an important finding. Mistakes, misunderstandings, and moments of discomfort emerged as critical entry points into cultural understanding. Rather than being perceived as failures, these experiences functioned as emotional gateways to deeper engagement with local residents and communities. Participants who embraced their discomfort often described accelerated processes of self-awareness and belonging. Linguistic and social missteps created opportunities to act with humility, empathy, and openness, revealing that integration is not achieved through comfort but through the willingness to remain present amid uncertainty. These “teachable tensions” illustrate that meaningful adaptation requires emotional engagement rather than passive adjustment.

Building on this fact, participants emphasized that belonging requires emotional vulnerability in relation to others, particularly in their interactions with local residents. The pursuit of perfection often created distance rather than connection, as many newcomers described how trying to “get everything right” limited their ability to engage with locals authentically. Belonging, therefore, was not achieved through mastery, but through openness, the willingness to make mistakes, to be corrected,

and to admit uncertainty in everyday encounters. This process transforms vulnerability into a relational strength, allowing newcomers to move beyond performance and into genuine interaction. As such, integration unfolds not as a linear progression, but as an emotional process that requires courage, humility, and sustained engagement with the people who shape the social fabric of the city.

Closely tied to this point, participants consistently highlighted that belonging emerges through mutual recognition between newcomers and local residents rather than through formal inclusion. While institutional structures may provide access, they do not guarantee connection. Instead, belonging was experienced in everyday interactions with locals, being greeted by name, being invited into shared spaces, or being guided with patience and care. These small, reciprocal gestures carried more weight than formal culture and language programs, demonstrating that inclusion is not a procedural achievement but a relational one. Recognition, in this sense, becomes the bridge between presence and belonging, transforming newcomers from observers into participants within local community life.

Taken together, these reflections reveal that integration is not simply a matter of adaptation, but a deeply human process rooted in emotional exchange between newcomers and local communities. Discomfort, vulnerability, and recognition are not obstacles to belonging; they are its very conditions. Through these experiences, newcomers begin to shift from navigating the city as outsiders to engaging with it as participants, gradually building relationships that are not imposed, but lived.

Third, historical, structural, and emotional dimensions of displacement was a key finding. Participants' experiences revealed that cultural gentrification in Mexico City cannot be understood solely as an economic or spatial phenomenon, but rather as a deeply historical, structural, and

emotional process. Mexico City operates not only as an urban space but as a layered site of memory, inequality, and aspiration, where past and present continuously shape one another. The Roma and Condesa neighbourhoods, originally designed to emulate European aesthetics during the Porfirian era, continue to reflect long-standing cultural hierarchies in which the foreign is often privileged over the local. What appears today as revitalization may, in practice, become a form of selective remembering, one that beautifies certain histories while silencing others, particularly those of communities that have been displaced. Meaningful coexistence, therefore, requires acknowledging these historical continuities and recognizing that integration unfolds within contexts shaped by memory, power, and exclusion.

At the same time, participants emphasized that these transformations are experienced not only structurally, but also emotionally. Local residents described grief over the disappearance of spaces that once anchored their identities, while newcomers expressed feelings of discomfort, guilt, and uncertainty as they began to understand their role within these changes. These shared yet asymmetrical emotional responses reveal that displacement operates not only through market forces, but also through psychological and relational dimensions. As Ritzer (2003) suggests through the concepts of the “glocal” and “grobal,” global forces do not simply enter local spaces; they reshape them, embedding inequality into everyday life. Cafés, shops, and housing markets begin to reorganize around new forms of consumption, redefining who feels at home and who does not. Economic comfort for some thus becomes inseparable from exclusion for others, often in ways that are subtle yet deeply felt.

These dynamics are further intensified by the environmental consequences of urban transformation. In neighbourhoods such as Roma and Condesa, processes of gentrification are frequently accompanied by “green” aesthetics and narratives of sustainability. However, participants’

reflections, supported by existing research (Álvarez et al., 2020; Reyes & Martínez, 2019), reveal that these developments often mask deeper ecological costs. As housing prices increase, lower-income residents are pushed toward the periphery, contributing to urban sprawl that encroaches upon conservation land, accelerates deforestation, and disrupts biodiversity. At the same time, large-scale construction projects place additional strain on water systems and urban infrastructure. These environmental pressures, though less visible, constitute another layer of structural violence, one that extends beyond human populations and affects the broader ecological systems that sustain urban life.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that displacement is not a singular process, but a multidimensional phenomenon that operates across historical, structural, emotional, and ecological domains. While both locals and newcomers may experience and contribute to these transformations in different ways, the deeper challenge lies not in assigning blame but in recognizing the interconnected systems that sustain inequality. From a peace education and conflict transformation perspective, this requires expanding the scope of analysis to include not only human relationships, but also the environments in which they unfold. Sustainable coexistence, therefore, depends on the ability to critically engage with these layered realities, fostering awareness that moves beyond individual experience toward collective responsibility.

Fourth, inequality, identity, and hierarchies of belonging are important findings. Participants' experiences revealed that integration is deeply shaped by systems of inequality that operate across identity, particularly through gender, safety, and social perception. Female participants frequently encountered subtle yet persistent assumptions that framed their presence in relation to family or marital roles, even when they had relocated as independent professionals. These gendered expectations limited

how their agency and professional identities were recognized, demonstrating that mobility does not dissolve patriarchal norms, but often relocates and reproduces them within new cultural contexts.

At the same time, participants described a tension between personal safety and structural violence. Those living in affluent and highly protected areas expressed awareness that their sense of security was not universally shared. Learning about the city's high rates of femicide, for example, prompted discomfort and reflection, revealing how economic privilege can shield some individuals from risks that others navigate daily. Safety, in this sense, becomes both a marker of privilege and a reminder of inequality. These experiences underscore that cultural adaptation cannot be understood in isolation from gendered and structural realities. Integration unfolds within systems where visibility, vulnerability, and protection are unevenly distributed.

Beyond these dynamics, participants also identified hierarchies within migrant communities themselves. Despite being grouped under the label of "foreigners," individuals' experiences were shaped by nationality, race, language, and perceived economic value. Certain accents, passports, and professional profiles carried greater social capital, while others were met with skepticism or exclusion. These distinctions constitute a form of symbolic violence (Galtung, 1990), one that fragments potential solidarity among newcomers while reproducing global power structures within the local context.

From a conflict transformation perspective, these layered inequalities highlight the importance of recognizing how power operates not only between locals and newcomers but also within migrant communities. As Lederach (1997) suggests, sustainable coexistence requires engaging with the relational dimensions of conflict, including those that remain unspoken or normalized. Meaningful

integration, therefore, depends not only on intercultural empathy but also on critical awareness of the hierarchies that shape belonging. Only by naming and addressing these internal asymmetries can communities move toward more equitable and authentic forms of coexistence.

Taken together, these findings reveal the layered complexity of cultural gentrification as a phenomenon that is simultaneously symbolic, structural, emotional, and ecological. While both locals and newcomers may contribute to and experience its effects in different ways, the central challenge lies not in assigning blame, but in transforming the systems that normalize exclusion. Peace education offers a pathway forward for locals and newcomers in Mexico City by shifting the focus from critique to action, fostering intentional spaces for reflection, intercultural dialogue, and historical awareness. Ultimately, the question extends beyond who occupies urban space, toward how individuals and communities learn to coexist within it, ethically, equitably, and with a shared sense of belonging.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the experiences and perceptions of expatriats living in Mexico City and how their presence reveals the complex emotional and structural dimensions of integration. Integration does not occur spontaneously. It demands effort through speaking the Spanish language, showing empathy and connection, and, above all, taking responsibility to interact genuinely. These findings demonstrate that transformation is not linear, but emerges through the interplay between individual awareness, relational engagement, and structural conditions.

This is precisely where peace education becomes essential, not as an abstract theory but as a practical framework for more conscious living. Its principles could be translated into structured pre-

arrival programs that include intercultural dialogue, critical historical memory, and reflexive practice for both newcomers and host communities. Post-arrival, localized community workshops, storytelling spaces, and language learning with cultural immersion components can foster mutual understanding and reduce symbolic violence. In this way, integration becomes intentional, empathetic, and deeply human. It offers tools to build communities that do not merely tolerate difference but actively listen to it, welcome it, and integrate it without erasing what already exists.

In Chapter six, based on the perspectives of this study's participants, the study's overall key findings and a set of concrete recommendations for future research and cross-cultural trainings are outlined. These proposals center on the pressing question of how language-learning programs and cross-cultural trainings can become sustainable tools for integration, not superficial adaptation, and what conditions are necessary to ensure that integration respects, preserves, and honours the identity of the local host community?

Chapter 6: Coexisting, A Skill We Must Learn

The previous chapters presented the voices of local residents and expats living in Mexico City. Their stories revealed not only their daily experiences, but also the emotional, linguistic, economic, and symbolic tensions that shape the city. This chapter moves from listening to interpreting what these lived experiences reveal about intercultural tension, belonging, coexistence, and the possibilities they open for conflict transformation. Understanding a city as complex, unequal, and vibrant as Mexico City requires more than empathy; it requires the willingness to pause, to critically analyze, and to name what often remains invisible.

The interviews that created this thesis uncover the threads that interlace identity, power, inequality, and possibility. These are not isolated anecdotes. They are narratives that illuminate broader systemic dynamics. Using grounded theory, the aim was not to fit participants into predefined categories, but to allow meaning to emerge from their lived experience. Within that process, the theoretical frameworks that guided this work, including peace education, identity, acculturation models, cultural gentrification, social cubism, structural violence (Galtung, 1990), and conflict transformation (Lederach, 1995), become visible in practice, not only as interpretative tools but also as pathways toward cross-cultural conflict transformation.

Overall Key Findings

This chapter advances a central argument, namely that the integration of expats in Mexico City is not solely determined by individual openness or effort. Rather, it is shaped by historical omission, symbolic hierarchies, and structural inequalities embedded within the city's social fabric.

The goal, therefore, is not simply to help newcomers adapt more efficiently but to question the systems that normalize inequity.

Tension, in this context, is not the problem. The problem arises when tension is ignored. What is unnamed becomes normalized, and what is normalized becomes inherited. Acknowledging these tensions is not a concession to destructive and dysfunctional conflicts; it is a commitment to cross-cultural conflict transformation. Discomfort, at times, is the most honest reflection of a deeper truth, and it is precisely within those fractures that the opportunity to rebuild something more just, more conscious, and more rooted emerges.

The conflicts identified in the thesis do not have clear beginnings, nor do they result from isolated actions. Rather, they emerge from intertwined and intersectional processes of history, economy, language, culture, and power. They unfold simultaneously at the level of personal experience, intergroup relations, and the structural conditions that shape urban life. This chapter does not seek to propose absolute truths. Instead, it maps the multiple layers of these dynamics and begins to construct responses that are not only effective but ethical. The aim is to imagine conflict transformation practices that are more just, more collective, and more aligned with the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

While these findings illuminate the multiple layers through which participants experience tension, belonging, and transformation, they also reveal a deeper coherence across these narratives. Beyond individual stories and thematic categories, there is an underlying pattern that connects these lived experiences. To move from description toward conceptualization, the following section presents

the grounded theoretical concept that emerges from the data, offering a more integrated understanding of how these dynamics unfold across self, relational, and structural dimensions.

The Emergent Grounded Theoretical Concept

While previous sections have described key findings and proposed practical responses, this section moves a step further by conceptualizing the underlying pattern that connects these experiences. What emerges from the narratives of local residents and expats is not a single explanation of cultural gentrification, but a patterned way of understanding how people inhabit, negotiate, and make sense of difference within the same urban space. Across interviews, participants did not describe integration as a linear process of adaptation, nor as a fixed or stable condition of belonging. Instead, their stories consistently revealed a more complex reality, one in which people coexist, yet do not always connect.

From a grounded theory perspective (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015), this study suggests that what unfolds in Mexico City is not simply coexistence, but a dynamic and uneven process of self, relational, and structural transformation. This conceptualization did not emerge from predefined categories but inductively from recurring tensions present in participants lived experiences: the discomfort of not understanding, the desire to belong, the asymmetries of power, and the gradual recognition of one's role within broader systems of inequality. These dimensions were not isolated; rather, they were interconnected and consistently observed across interviews, revealing a multidimensional process that shapes how individuals and groups experience belonging, distance, and transformation.

At the level of the self, participants' narratives revealed that transformation begins with disruption. Feelings of disorientation, frustration, vulnerability, and, at times, guilt were not peripheral experiences, but central to the process of learning. Expats described moments of not understanding language, social cues, or cultural expectations, while local residents expressed feelings of displacement, loss, and emotional fatigue in response to rapid urban change. These experiences challenged taken-for-granted assumptions about identity, normality, and belonging. Identity, as reflected in participants' stories, did not emerge as static or fixed; rather it evolved through interaction, exposure, and lived experience (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979; McKeown et al., 2016).

This process aligns with acculturation as a dynamic negotiation between continuity and change, where individuals engage with new cultural environments while maintaining elements of their original identity (Berry, 1997). Participants' narratives suggest that identity is not replaced, but reconfigured. Several expats described adopting local expressions, rhythms, and social practices, while some local participants noted subtle incorporations of foreign habits or perspectives into their own daily lives. These processes indicate that cultural exchange is not unidirectional, but reciprocal. In this sense, transformation at the level of the self involves not only adaptation, but the ongoing reconstruction of identity within a shared social space.

At the relational level, participants' experiences revealed that coexistence does not necessarily imply connection. Individuals may share the same neighbourhoods, cafés, and public spaces, yet remain socially and emotionally distant. However, across interviews, there was also a recurring, though often unarticulated desire to move beyond parallel lives toward more meaningful forms of interaction. Participants described moments of connection, being greeted, being invited, being corrected with

patience, or being recognized beyond social labels as deeply significant. At the same time, misunderstandings, silence, and unspoken expectations often reinforced invisible boundaries between groups.

These dynamics demonstrate that belonging is not produced through proximity alone, but through the quality of relationships. It is negotiated through dialogue, shaped by empathy, and sustained through mutual recognition. From a conflict transformation perspective, these everyday interactions become critical sites where tensions can either harden into division or be transformed into opportunities for connection (Lederach, 1997). Thus, relational transformation does not occur automatically, it requires intentional engagement and the development of intercultural competencies that are often absent.

At the structural level, participants' experiences exposed the broader systems that shape and constrain possibilities for interaction and belonging. Housing markets, corporate relocation packages, language hierarchies, and global economic dynamics all influence who can access space, who feels welcome, and who is displaced, physically and symbolically. Many expats described arriving with institutional support that facilitated comfort, while local residents observed rising costs of living, the transformation of neighbourhood identities, and the gradual erosion of cultural spaces. These structural conditions often operate invisibly, yet they profoundly shape everyday life.

Although participants did not explicitly name "violence" in their narratives, their experiences reflect the presence of what Galtung (1990) conceptualizes as structural and cultural violence. Structural violence becomes visible in unequal access to housing, economic opportunity, and urban

space, while cultural violence is reflected in normalized hierarchies that privilege foreignness over local identity, often embedded in language, aesthetics, and social perception. Even in the absence of overt confrontation, these forms of violence shape lived experience by determining whose presence is valued, whose is tolerated, and whose is displaced. In this sense, coexistence unfolds within systems that are historically and structurally unequal (Galtung, 1990).

More importantly, these three dimensions do not operate independently. Rather, they are mutually reinforcing. Structural inequalities shape relational dynamics, relational experiences influence self-perception, and individual awareness can, in turn, open possibilities for transforming relationships and questioning structures. The process that emerges is therefore not linear, but recursive and interconnected, where change at one level can influence the others.

This grounded theoretical concept of “self, relational, and structural transformation” also highlights a central tension identified throughout the study: while both expats and local residents inhabit the same urban space, they do not experience it from the same position. Coexistence is lived unevenly. Some move through the city with relative ease, while others navigate it through constant negotiation. Recognizing this asymmetry shifts the focus from individual adaptation toward a more critical understanding of shared responsibility.

Crucially, what emerged from this study is that neither newcomers nor local communities are inherently equipped to navigate these dynamics. Participants’ experiences suggest that while there is often a willingness, and at times a desire, to connect and belong, there is also a lack of tools, spaces, and frameworks that support meaningful intercultural engagement. No one is formally taught how to

interpret cultural codes, how to navigate difference, or how to develop empathy for the experiences of others. As a result, tensions, misunderstandings, and forms of exclusion are not simply interpersonal failures, but reflections of broader educational and structural gaps.

From a peace education perspective, this insight is particularly significant. If what emerges from this study is understood as a process of self, relational, and structural transformation, then coexistence can be intentionally supported, nurtured, and taught (Lederach, 1997; Reardon, 1988). Transformation does not begin at the structural level alone; it begins with individuals becoming aware of their positionality, extends through relationships grounded in empathy and recognition, and gradually opens possibilities for addressing structural inequalities. In this sense, coexistence becomes not merely a condition of sharing space, but a skill, one that must be learned, practiced, and sustained over time.

The following section builds on this conceptual foundation to translate these insights into concrete strategies for fostering more conscious, equitable, and relational forms of coexistence in Mexico City.

Tools for a Shared City

Integration does not occur on its own, and good intentions are insufficient. Nor is it enough to know how to order tacos in Spanish. What is at stake is not merely the comfort of those who arrive, but the cohesion of the social fabric that existed prior to their arrival. If coexistence is to become more just, inclusive, conscious, and less unequal, the response must begin at the root: with forms of education,

dialogue, and shared reflection that emerge from the tensions and experiences described throughout the thesis.

This education must go beyond language acquisition and must include intercultural training designed within the peace education paradigm and implemented through a dual approach, one that engages both those who arrive and local people who welcome newcomers. One of the study's central findings of this study is that neither side holds all the answers. Some expats arrive with no knowledge of Mexico's history, inequalities, or cultural codes. At the same time, many Mexican residents hesitate to assert boundaries, to explain unspoken rules, or to defend communal spaces for fear of being perceived as "*malinchistas*."¹¹

Peace education calls for critical awareness of the structures that render language, and access to it, a mechanism of inequality (Galtung, 1990). Encouraging newcomers to learn the local language is not merely a call for adaptation; it is also a call for justice, because it empowers local communities to restore shared spaces of dialogue and reclaim their right to participate in the symbolic life of the city. When language is framed as a tool for equity rather than assimilation, it becomes a bridge between experiences, allowing coexistence to unfold through mutual understanding rather than silent segregation (Lederach, 1997).

¹¹ Malinchista: Someone who favours another culture over their own. The term comes from the story of Malinche, a native woman who served as an interpreter and lover to the Spanish colonizer Hernán Cortés. Malinche was considered a traitor because of her relationship with Cortés (Foreign Native, 2024).

From the lens of peace education, this insight is critical (Reardon, 1988). Conflict is not transformed through tolerance alone, but through tools that foster recognition, understanding, and collective transformation (Lederach, 1997), and these tools can be taught. An effective intercultural program must not resemble a set of etiquette rules or a tourist orientation session. Rather, it should become a reflective process of unlearning and relearning. It must invite participants to see the city through unfamiliar perspectives, to question their own positions of privilege, and to understand the symbols, silences, and historical tensions that shape both public and private spaces. Reflection alone is not enough; coexistence must be practiced. The following section explores how to transform relationships between local people and newcomers in Mexico City.

For Those Who Arrive: Learning as Transformation

Intercultural education for newcomers must begin long before adaptation becomes survival. Integration requires more than empathy; it calls for critical awareness, humility, and sustained learning. The following dimensions outline how this process can evolve from mere adjustment to ethical self-transformation.

Intercultural learning for expats must extend far beyond practical survival or linguistic ability. It must become a reflective process that touches on multiple layers of social awareness and ethical positioning. This includes, among other components:

- *Learning not only the language, but also its social and emotional nuances.* Language in Mexico functions not only as a means of communication but as a social connector and a marker of

belonging. A simple greeting, the use of *usted*¹² versus *tú*¹³, or the tone of voice in a casual interaction can carry complex emotional weight. Participants emphasized that communication relies not only on words but also on nonverbal cues, tone, timing, and social context. Even subtle gestures, like a smile or a pause, can signal inclusion or distancing. Mastery of grammar does not equate to cultural fluency. Understanding when to speak, when to pause, and how to interpret silence is essential for building genuine connections.

- *Understanding the country's history and inequality, not from guilt, but as part of the context.* Many participants arrived without any meaningful knowledge of Mexico's colonial legacy, structural inequality, or the socio-economic stratification embedded in daily life. Without that context, their experiences remained superficial, and in some cases, complicit with unintentional harm. Recognition of the foundational class inequalities regarding property and wealth distribution that shape social interactions, and urban displacement can foster compassion and understanding, while also providing ethical orientation and cultural depth.

- *Recognizing their place in the urban impact chain and how their arrival transforms relationships, even unintentionally.* Expats often participate in a chain of urban transformation that displaces lower-income residents and redefines cultural spaces, yet this impact is rarely acknowledged. This awareness requires critical self-location and understanding how one's presence can affect others, even when there is no deliberate intent to cause harm. This recognition would entail several key forms of learning and reflection, including developing sensitivity to local social codes, acknowledging the ethical implications of one's economic and class comfort, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility

¹² Spanish for pronoun "you" formal.

¹³ Spanish for pronoun "you" general.

toward the community's newcomers are entering. Recognizing one's positionality in this way allows integration to move beyond personal adaptation toward collective awareness and ethical participation within the broader urban ecosystem.

- *Learning to read local codes and symbolic meanings is important.* Culture is encoded in the details like knowing how to greet a neighbour, understanding the layered meanings of “*ahorita*,” or navigating the informal rules of shared space are not minor matters; they are expressions of social order and respect. Unspoken social codes mediate everyday interactions, and their misinterpretation often leads to misunderstanding (Lederach, 1997). Far from being trivial, these cultural codes are essential for building respectful and reciprocal relationships that sustain social harmony.

- *Replacing a logic of consumption with a logic of shared responsibility.* Many expats arrive with a consumer-oriented mindset, seeking experience, comfort, and convenience. This paradigm, while understandable, often erases the social dynamics of the communities they enter. Consequently, this way of being often overlooks or erases the social dynamics of the communities they enter. When newcomers engage with a place as consumers rather than as participants, they unintentionally redefine community identity and territorial agency. Peace education that it is critical to shift from consumption to contribution, and from engaging with local life as observers to participating as ethical co-creators of community (Freire, 1970).

Some of the steps to achieve this paradigm shift in terms of class privilege include fostering long-term commitment to neighbourhood life through consistent engagement with local networks; supporting community-based initiatives and small businesses instead of exclusively international or corporate services; participating in intercultural dialogue sessions or civic projects that promote shared learning; and collaborating with local residents in cultural, environmental, and educational efforts.

Equally important is practicing reflective learning, where expats critically examine how their consumption choices, housing decisions, and mobility patterns influence others. Although these actions are modest, they cultivate accountability and reciprocity, transforming daily life from an individual pursuit of comfort into a collective practice of coexistence.

- *Technology and the illusion of cultural familiarity breed alienation.* In an era of increasing digital connectivity, many newcomers rely on technology, maps, apps, search engines, and social media to navigate new environments. While these tools offer convenience, they also construct a curated version of reality that can obscure the complexities of everyday life. Cultural expectations, social codes, and the rhythm of interpersonal relationships are difficult to capture through screens. Overreliance on decontextualized information fosters false confidence and reinforces simplified stereotypes. For this reason, intercultural training must not only transmit knowledge but also cultivate critical reflection on the limits of digital understanding (Freire, 1970). Programs should invite participants to examine how algorithms, online content, and social media trends shape their perceptions of place and people (Lederach, 1997). Rather than assuming comprehension through digital exposure, they must encourage slow observation, relational learning, and conscious unlearning as essential steps toward genuine coexistence.

- *Peace education teaches people that dignity is foundational to coexistence.* When structural or symbolic violence erodes people's dignity, through exclusionary language, microaggressions, or invisibilization, the result is not only alienation but relational fracture (Galtung, 1990). Healing these fractures requires forging spaces where local knowledge, pain, and identity are acknowledged and held with respect. In the context of cultural gentrification, this restoration of dignity also implies recognizing asymmetries of power, who speaks, who is heard, and whose experiences are validated

(Lederach, 1997). Coexistence cannot flourish when certain voices remain peripheral or when daily interactions reproduce hierarchies of worth.

This means that newcomers must understand that integration is not a one-sided process of adaptation, but a shared ethical responsibility to preserve the dignity of others while learning to belong. It involves active listening, humility, and the willingness to confront one's own privilege to create relationships based on reciprocity rather than benevolence and false generosity. These practices transform coexistence from a passive condition into an active, ongoing commitment to justice and mutual respect.

Coexistence, however, cannot depend solely on the ethical awareness of those who arrive. For transformation to be genuine, it must also include those who receive. Integration, as peace education reminds us, is a mutual process as it requires both openness from newcomers and affirmation from local communities (Lederach, 1997). The same structures that privilege some also silence others and healing that imbalance demands active participation on both sides.

For Those Who Receive: Reclaiming Voice and Cultural Confidence

Transformation cannot occur unless those who are disempowered also have the space to heal, revalue, and reassert their place within the changing city. For many Mexican residents, the rapid influx of foreigners has not only altered urban dynamics, it has also affected how local culture is seen, both externally and internally. Intercultural learning, therefore, must address the need for cultural affirmation, recognition, empowerment, and the restoration of dignity that has been quietly eroded by global hierarchies of value (Freire, 1970).

Peace education offers a pathway toward that restoration as it recognizes that social harmony does not emerge from silence or avoidance, but from the collective capacity to name loss, reclaim agency, and rebuild confidence without turning inward or excluding others (Lederach, 1997). This involves strengthening cultural pride for local communities while remaining open to dialogue, protecting identity without freezing it in nostalgia, and asserting people's belonging through participation rather than possession of economic or cultural symbolic goods.

In this sense, creating intercultural learning spaces for Mexican residents are essential. They must address distinct yet interconnected dimensions of cultural affirmation and healing that empower communities to reclaim their dignity, confidence, and agency within a changing urban landscape.

- *Cultural affirmation and confidence build genuine relationships.* People's cultural identity is not static as it evolves through dialogue, memory, and experience (Lederach, 1997). Genuine pride emerges when communities understand culture as living and adaptive rather than as folklore displayed for external validation. This affirmation means reclaiming ownership of one's narrative without positioning it against others. It invites the celebration of diversity within Mexican national identity, that is, regional, linguistic, historical, Indigenous, and generational, while recognizing the shared values that connect them. By grounding interaction in this inclusive sense of identity pride, residents can engage with newcomers confidently and respectfully, transforming coexistence from defensiveness into mutual exchanges.

- *Healing internalized inequality is essential within the local host community.* The presence of foreigners often magnifies Mexico's pre-existing social hierarchies, revealing the

intersectional persistence of classism, racism, and colonial mentality. These reactions are not accidental, as they are inherited, as they represent forms of internalized violence that erode collective dignity. Addressing these hurts requires deliberate pedagogical and communal processes that help unlearn deeply rooted hierarchies and name long-silenced traumas of inequality, shame, and symbolic displacement (Volkan, 1998). Healing, therefore, is not nostalgia for a lost past as it is the courage to reinterpret pain as collective strength. Through this process, communities can dismantle invisible hierarchies and rebuild mutual respect grounded in equality and historical consciousness.

- *People's empowerment is possible by breaking down boundaries and cultural transmission.* Hospitality, a defining feature of Mexican culture, is often mistaken for passivity. Intercultural learning must therefore empower locals to assert boundaries firmly and without shame. Naming limits is not a rejection of newcomers; it is self-preservation that safeguards communal integrity. Equally, teaching one's culture, explaining customs, correcting misconceptions, and guiding newcomers through local expectations should not be viewed as emotional labor for others' benefit but as a conscious act of protection. These empowering acts resist symbolic erasure and affirm people's agency. By transforming hospitality into empowerment, local communities ensure that cultural meaning is not diluted but shared with confidence, creating a coexistence that is built on respect and reciprocity.

In sum, both newcomers and local people must participate in the collective task of reweaving the city's social fabric. Integration is not a matter of adaptation alone, as it is of co-creation. When newcomers approach Mexico City with critical awareness and humility, and when local communities engage with confidence and openness, then coexistence becomes possible. Yet awareness and empathy,

while necessary, are not enough on their own to build real connections. They must be translated into the structure and into concrete, replicable programs that sustain dialogue and build the skills of peaceful living.

From Awareness to Action: A Pedagogy of Coexistence

Although awareness is an essential component of cross-cultural conflict transformation, it must evolve into practice. The reflections and narratives explored in the thesis reveal that gentrified neighbourhoods are not only physical sites of change but symbolic arenas where everyday gestures, a greeting, a rental negotiation, even a passing glance, carry the potential to build interpersonal and intergroup peace or reinforce exclusion. Intercultural tension, therefore, is not incidental because it is also structural, and addressing it requires intentional and multi-layered strategies grounded in education, reflection, and dialogue.

Building on the findings of this study and informed by peace education and conflict transformation frameworks, the following section outlines one possible pedagogical model for supporting more ethical and sustainable coexistence in Mexico City:

1. *Separate workshops are needed to process people's identity so that they can reflect emotionally.* The first level consists of two parallel and separate workshop series: one for expats and another for local Mexican residents. The objective of these sessions is to provide emotionally safe spaces where participants can explore their own identity positions, reflect on lived experiences, share their stories, and process complex feelings without the pressure of intercultural performance.

For expats, these workshops would focus on:

- Unpacking privilege and understanding how global power dynamics influence urban space.
- Naming emotional responses like guilt, discomfort, or confusion, and transforming them into reflective awareness.
- Challenging internalized narratives of entitlement, efficiency, or “neutral” consumption of place.

For Mexicans, the sessions would support:

- Processing symbolic displacement and emotional fatigue in the face of rapid change.
- Reclaiming narrative authority over their cultural and territorial identity.
- Affirming self-worth in a context where foreign validation is often overvalued.

This first stage is not about debating or negotiating; it is about identities, lived experiences, and positionalities. Workshop participants must articulate their perspectives before entering shared intercultural spaces, as self-awareness precedes dialogue.

2. Intercultural dialogue sessions become guided encounters to repair relations. The second level involves structured intercultural dialogue, where both groups can come together in facilitated sessions to engage in critical yet empathetic conversation and story sharing. These encounters must be professionally guided, led by trained facilitators grounded in peace education that are skilled in managing and de-escalating tension, fostering empathy and equitable participation (Lederach, 1997).

Key components might include:

- Story-sharing circles, where participants narrate their experiences of arrival, loss, misunderstanding, or resistance.
- Empathy exercises that deconstruct assumptions and encourage perspective-taking.
- Relational mapping, where groups visually explore how their lives intersect, economically, socially, and emotionally, in the same urban space.
- Conflict transformation tools like collaborative meaning-making and restorative feedback processes.

Participants could then move beyond tolerance and into relational accountability through these processes with the recognition that coexistence requires more than politeness, as it also demands responsibility, listening, and co-creation.

3. *Contextualized Spanish language education can create a sense of belonging through the language.* The third and most innovative level is the inclusion of contextualized Spanish education, designed specifically for expats and families living in Mexico City. Traditional language classes, which focus solely on grammar or formal vocabulary, are insufficient. Language education must be re-conceptualized as a cultural integration process, one that teaches not just how to speak, but how to interpret the nonverbal cues to actively fit into the culture.

This approach might include:

- Regional idioms and common expressions like the various meanings of *ahorita*, *ándale*, *ojalá*, *con permiso*, etc.
- Sociolinguistic codes such as including when to use *usted* or *tú*, how to interact in informal markets, or how to communicate respect and solidarity.
- Cultural pragmatics, such as how to engage in small talk, navigate hierarchy in work settings, or interpret silence in conversation.
- Critical reflection exercises, where learners examine how language reflects power, race, class, and history in Mexico.

Contextualized language programs become bridges that empower expats not only to communicate in Spanish, but also to interpret, respond, and connect authentically within their host environment. To teach language without context is to deny its political and symbolic weight in terms of power, identity, and access (Freire, 1970). Teaching language as an act of intercultural bridging aligns fully with peace education's commitment to dialogical learning, cultural humility, and mutual transformation (Lederach, 1997).

Implementing a systems approach is needed to build a sustainable process. To transform these ideas into sustainable practice, the model must function as a collaborative ecosystem supported by multiple stakeholders:

- Initial implementation could be facilitated, coordinated, and led by grassroots organizations and non-governmental institutions already working on cultural awareness, migration, and education,

such as Huitzilli Cultural Expression, with potential collaboration from local cultural centres and universities. Over time, the *Secretaría de Cultura* could coordinate and expand the program at the national level, allowing each state to adapt workshops to its demographic realities and migration patterns.

- While long-term sustainability should rely on public funding, early implementation of intercultural programs could be supported through corporate partnerships with companies that employ or relocate expats. These organizations would benefit directly from reduced cultural friction and higher retention of international employees. Private companies in Mexico can deduct donations made to certified NGOs from their taxable income, which provides a viable mechanism to channel corporate support toward intercultural education programs. Consequently, NGOs focused on cultural awareness, migration, or community development could administer the workshops while receiving tax-deductible contributions from businesses.

Additionally, participation fees could eventually be integrated into visa processes as a modest cultural orientation contribution like practices in other countries (OECD, 2017). Over time, this blended funding approach, combining state oversight, private engagement, and civic collaboration, would help transform intercultural education into a shared public good.

- Although migration is often treated as a federal matter, intercultural coexistence is experienced locally. Therefore, the state's role should extend beyond regulation toward facilitation, ensuring that entry policies, visa frameworks, and urban development initiatives align with inclusive and peace-oriented practices. The Mexican state could also convene public-private dialogues with real estate developers, local businesses, and education institutions to ensure that integration is understood as a collective social responsibility, and not as a peripheral concern.

- There must be grassroots scalability and community monitoring to ensure the program's success. Urban environments are dynamic, and the composition of their communities evolves continuously. Intercultural programs must be flexible and responsive to these changes to remain effective. Regular reviews are essential to ensure that workshop content continues to reflect relevant issues and local realities. In Mexico City, neighbourhoods such as Polanco, Condesa, and Roma each possess distinct identities and needs; therefore, the model must adapt according to the needs of local communities.

Thus, local representatives or small community committees composed of residents rather than government officials could collaborate with intercultural training facilitators to identify emerging challenges, propose new peace education themes, and ensure that each cross-cultural training program remains grounded in peoples lived experience. Scalability should be understood as horizontal rather than hierarchical growth. Instead of replicating a rigid structure, each neighbourhood would nurture its own version of the workshops, maintaining the shared ethical foundation of peace education while allowing for cultural specificity. This strategy would prevent top-down technocratic bureaucratization and, instead, it would sustain genuine community leadership.

- Participatory evaluation and ongoing adaptation should likewise be participatory and reflective. Participants could complete self-assessments at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the program to capture shifts in their awareness, empathy, and sense of belonging to the intercultural encounter groups. These evaluations would serve as feedback loops for facilitators, allowing real-time adjustments to content and the overall training practice. At a broader level, annual community surveys in targeted neighbourhoods could assess local people's perceptions of coexistence, adaptation, inclusion, and building better relationships. The data generated from these instruments

would inform revisions to the curriculum, ensuring that it remains relevant, grounded, and responsive to social change.

In practice, these efforts require coordinated collaboration between the public, private, and civic sectors. Universities and cultural institutions could contribute by training facilitators, NGOs can anchor local implementation, private companies can provide resources, and state agencies can ensure accountability and long-term policy integration.

Moreover, as Lederach (1997) reminds us, sustainable peace is not built in treaties or grand gestures, but through the everyday actions of how we greet a neighbour, how we listen, and how we share space. Therefore, intercultural training must not be treated as a one-time initiative but as a living pedagogy, a process continuously evaluated, adapted, and redesigned in collaboration with both newcomers and local communities. Only through dialogue, flexibility, and shared ownership can cities like Mexico City move toward genuine coexistence. Integration, in this vision, is not a destination but a dynamic, ongoing practice that demands reflection, humility, and renewal.

Yet for these frameworks to take root, coexistence must be cultivated not only through policy or programming but through the everyday reconstruction of collective values, relationships, and trust. This process, slow, local, and deeply human, is where rebuilding must begin.

Rebuilding from the Ground Up

The findings presented throughout this study do not merely call for the design of intercultural training programs. They urge a more fundamental shift: to rethink, from the roots, how societies

educate for coexistence in difference. What is at stake is not only how foreign residents adapt, but how cities make meaning of difference, tension, and belonging without reproducing erasure. This transformation does not begin when someone crosses a border. It begins much earlier: in classrooms, in textbooks, in the stories a society tells about itself. As Peace Education proposes (Lederach, 1997; Reardon, 1988), peace is not the absence of conflict, but the active presence of justice, historical memory, and mutual respect. These are not innate qualities; they can be taught, and, critically, they can be learned.

For this reason, the proposals presented in this thesis extend beyond intercultural trainings designed for expats and host communities. They include a call to embed, from early education, comprehensive content related to cultural diversity, shared histories, structural inequalities, empathy development, and intercultural intelligence. These are not to be treated as supplementary or peripheral topics. Rather, they should form part of the core curriculum in any nation that recognizes itself as *mestizo*¹⁴, multilingual, dynamic, and marked by enduring social asymmetries. If the aspiration is to create a city that welcomes newcomers without erasing itself, then future generations must be raised not merely to tolerate difference, but to understand it, honour it, and defend it. This requires pedagogical reform that is both content-rich and emotionally intelligent, equipping students with the tools to navigate and transform tension, rather than fear or suppress it.

Tension is not the problem. The real threat lies in ignoring it. What remains unnamed becomes normalized. What becomes normalized is eventually inherited. Thus, to acknowledge tensions is not to

¹⁴Mestizo: a person with mixed racial ancestry, mixed Indigenous and European descent (Merriam-Webster, 2024).

surrender to conflict; it is to create the conditions for transformation. It is to understand that discomfort often reveals uncomfortable truths. And only by facing those truths, those symbolic fractures and inherited silences, can something more just, more profound, and more collectively owned begin to emerge. Integration, therefore, must not be seen as a static goal, but as a daily practice: a relational and ethical commitment sustained through conscious choices.

What this chapter offers is not a prescriptive conclusion, but a clear invitation to remain curious, to remain uncomfortable, and above all, to remain committed to building a city where difference does not divide but deepens the very meaning of belonging. Yet for such an invitation to resonate beyond the stories shared here, it is important to reflect on the broader relevance of this study. What do these findings contribute to the fields of peace education, intercultural dialogue, transformational conflict resolution, and urban integration?

Research Shortcomings and Future Pathways

No research can capture the entirety of a city's complexity, nor should it pretend to. As this thesis mapped out the contours of cultural gentrification and urban coexistence in Mexico City, certain limitations inevitably surfaced, blank spaces on the map that deserve acknowledgment, reflection, and future exploration. These omissions do not diminish the study's value; rather, they clarify its scope and illuminate where future inquiry must go further.

One of the most significant reflections that emerged in retrospect was the understated role of socioeconomic background among local participants. While the study did not apply income level or economic profile as a primary selection criterion, it became evident that individuals' socioeconomic

positioning deeply influenced how they perceived foreign presence, urban transformation, and symbolic exclusion. For instance, a resident from a middle-income background might feel displaced in cultural or linguistic terms, whereas someone working in the informal economy may experience gentrification as a direct threat to livelihood and survival. Including participants from a broader range of socioeconomic contexts, particularly tenants, street vendors, or families with limited financial resources, could have offered essential layers of insight. Future research must take these intersections seriously, as economic conditions and cultural identity are not isolated variables, but deeply intertwined realities that shape the lived experience of urban change. Plus, many people including Indigenous migrant from different rural areas to the city and so those cross cutting ethnocultural identities must also be considered in an intersectional qualitative research design.

Beyond the demographics of participants, it is essential to recognize that cultural gentrification is not merely a matter of interpersonal dynamics or neighbourhood aesthetics, as it is a symptom of deeper structural forces. Mapping those systemic forces in greater detail, through policy analysis, economic modelling, or media discourse studies, remains a necessary next step. To address only the cultural symptom of interpersonal and intergroup conflict is to treat the surface while leaving the root causes untouched.

Moreover, emerging mobility patterns are reshaping the social and economic landscape of Mexico City in ways that warrant urgent scholarly attention. The growing presence of digital nomads and returning migrants introduces new complexities to local dynamics of privilege, belonging, and displacement. These groups occupy ambiguous positions because they are both integrated and detached, as well as beneficiaries and bystanders of gentrification processes. Understanding how their

mobility, consumption patterns, and cultural narratives interact with existing inequalities will be essential to any future framework for coexistence.

These demographic shifts are occurring within an increasingly volatile geopolitical climate. The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency has reignited concerns about mass deportations and economic disruption. New tariffs and shifting trade policies are undermining nearshoring efforts in Mexico, prompting multinational corporations to reconsider operations and, in some cases, relocate back to the United States (Migration Policy Institute, 2023; World Bank, 2023). This shift may lead to a decline in traditional corporate mobility while accelerating informal global migration, particularly among digital nomads. At the same time, nationalist sentiment within Mexico is also intensifying. Trump-era rhetoric has rekindled public frustration, not only toward U.S. politics but toward foreign presence in the country more broadly (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). The resurgence of “Gringo Go Home” narratives reflect deepening exhaustion with inequality, displacement, and perceived cultural imposition.

Future qualitative and quantitative research must, therefore, examine these evolving trends, like returning migration, informal global mobility, and a rising local frustration toward the foreign presence in the country, not as isolated phenomena, but as interconnected forces that continue to reshape the cultural and emotional architecture of Mexico City. Only by acknowledging their complexity can policy, education, and community practice remain both relevant and just.

Conclusion

What has been mapped here is only one thread in a broader, unfolding story. The work is far from complete, but in naming these absences and pointing toward new intersections, this study honors what research is meant to do, not to claim finality, but to clear space for deeper reflection, more inclusive voices, and the continued construction of cities where coexistence is not a privilege, but a shared and sustained act. One that must be learned, practiced, and continually reimagined across personal, relational, and structural levels.

These reflections underscore that understanding a city is never a finished task. As new actors, narratives, and tensions continue to emerge, the responsibility of researchers, and of those policymakers and educators who build upon their research, is to keep listening, questioning, and reimagining what coexistence can mean in complex urban milieus like Mexico City.

Conclusion

This concluding chapter synthesizes the central core insights of this study, connecting the voices of participants with the theoretical and practical frameworks that guided the research. What is at stake in this research is not only the integration of expats, nor simply the transformation of neighbourhoods, but the future of how cities live, breathe, and hold differences. What began as a local story, told through the voices of some residents and newcomers in Roma, Condesa, and Polanco, reveals something far more expansive, namely the urgent need to rethink coexistence in large urban areas shaped by transnational movement, symbolic displacement, and cultural transformation.

This thesis set out to explore how the lived experiences of locals and expats reveal the dynamics of intercultural tension, belonging, and coexistence in Mexico City, and what possibilities these experiences open for transformation. The answer did not emerge in abstract theories or standardized policies because it emerged in the 12 participants' pauses, stories, moments of tension, and in their desire for recognition. Integration, as this study has shown, does not occur naturally. It is not guaranteed by proximity, nor achieved through politeness. It is an intentional and ongoing process, built through reflection, dialogue, and mutual transformation.

The thesis findings demonstrate that intercultural tensions unfold simultaneously across multiple layers of social life. Structural inequalities, economic, political, cultural, historical, and linguistic, shape the conditions under which people encounter one another. At the same time, these tensions are lived relationally, through everyday interactions marked by distance, misunderstanding, or connection. Finally, they are experienced at a personal level, where individuals navigate identity,

discomfort, adaptation, and belonging. These dimensions, interpreted through the framework of social cubism (Byrne et al., 2003), reveal that conflict does not exist in isolation but is embedded in the very fabric of urban life. Yet it is through peace education (Reardon, 1988) and conflict transformation (Lederach, 1995) that these complexities can be transformed into ethical action. These frameworks offer the tools to name what is unspoken, to humanize what has been abstracted, and to turn coexistence into a commitment to building more just and conscious relationships rather than living apart.

Rather than offering a single solution, this thesis highlights pathways through which coexistence can be reimagined more ethically and consciously. These include the need for deeper intercultural awareness, the recognition of historical and structural inequalities, and the creation of spaces where dialogue, reflection, and mutual learning can take place. This thesis has proposed some specific strategies to better intergroup relations like bidirectional intercultural training, contextualized language education, and the integration of cultural memory and critical reflection into early and ongoing education. These are not auxiliary interventions; they are essential tools for a city that seeks to remain both open and rooted. Further, the thesis has argued that integration must extend beyond the individual, becoming a shared civic responsibility. Companies, schools, communities, and public institutions must all participate in constructing the conditions for equitable and meaningful connections and belonging.

The thesis has also emphasized that tension, far from being a sign of failure, is often a sign of life. It signals the meeting point of unequal histories, divergent expectations, and contested spaces. When left unnamed, tension hardens into resentment or indifference, but when acknowledged, it

becomes the very starting point for transformation at the level of the self, in relationships between groups, and within the structures that shape everyday life.

Coexistence is not an instinct. It is a skill that must be cultivated, practiced, and taught. In a city as complex and contradictory as Mexico City, where past and present collide in every corner of the metropolis, the task is not merely to host or to adapt to newcomers, but to build a common life that is conscious, ethical, and just for all residents.

The thesis findings not only invite reflection on the complexity of intergroup conflict in Mexico City but also position coexistence as a shared civic practice rather than an abstract ideal. The thesis research does not offer final answers; it opens a space for deeper questions, broader inclusion, and the continued reimagining of how societies live together in difference.

In the end, peace is not found in avoiding conflict. It is found in the courage to name it, to sit with it, and to rebuild, learning, day-by-day, the skill of coexistence. One that must be continually learned, practiced, and reimagined across personal, relational, and structural levels.

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