

# MEXICAN WAVE

text: Susanne Kennedy photography: Vincent Long

From being dubbed the city with the worst air pollution in the world, change has come to Mexico City and is visible for all to see.

Este jardín vertical aporta distintos beneficios ambientales con los cuales todos nos favorecemos:

- Genera el oxígeno requerido por 285 personas al año.
- Atrapa más de 37,000 gramos de polvo al año.
- Filtra más de 190 toneladas de gases nocivos al año.
- Reduce hasta 10 decibeles la contaminación sonora.



GARI JIER





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**R**ed white and green are the colours of environmental action in Mexico City: tomato-coloured Metrobuses, the retro reds and whites of the City's public bicycles, and the olive, lime and emerald tapestry of the City's growing network of urban gardens.

Rapid urbanisation in the late twentieth century transformed Mexico City into one of the most densely populated cities in the world, with a reputation for extreme traffic congestion and poor air quality. This infamy peaked in 1992 when the United Nations labelled the City's air pollution the worst in the world. The government responded quickly to this crisis by moving most heavy industry outside the city centre, and strong government commitment to sustainability and the environment has continued to this day.

The state government introduced Mexico's first integrated medium-term Green Plan in 2007. This was quickly followed by the Climate Change Action Program, which had a particular focus on tackling air pollution and the promotion of eco-mobility. Recently, the second Climate Change Action Program 2014–20 (PACCM) was released by a new administration.

The Ecobici public bike scheme was created in 2010 with the aim of improving air quality by shifting mobility behaviour. Both of these objectives have been supported by strict driver restrictions and the replacement of old buses and taxis with newer, cleaner models. ➔



Ecobici is to be expanded by 60 per cent through 2014 and 2015 and the City’s Environment Minister, Tanya Muller, hopes to grow the program by 30,000 users and increase daily trips to 60,000 over this period.

“Mexico City is the first public bike-sharing system in the world that integrates with the public transport system,” explains Secretary for Mexico City’s Department of Environment, “once users have registered with the (Ecobici) system.”

Roma Norte resident, Eva Morales, has seen Ecobici facilitate a change in the bike riding culture in the City. “Before, people weren’t cycling because they were scared of the traffic,” said Morales. “But Ecobici made riding so attractive – cheap and fashionable – it helped people overcome their fears of travelling this way. The (independent) night rides, and the new gear shops, also helped to make it trendy.”

You need only scratch Mexico City’s surface to discover a quickly expanding urban garden network. These community, vertical and rooftop gardens are transforming previously under-utilised, often concrete spaces, into vibrant, living ones. Many of these verdant projects were inspired by the government’s Azoteas Verdes (Green Rooves) program, which began in 2010.

In the past two years, the current administration has doubled the City’s green public spaces to 6000 square metres, spending around \$1US million on Azoteas Verdes in 2013 alone.

“Green roofs don’t just help purify the air, they reduce the heat island effect, air-conditioning bills and maintenance costs,” said Muller. “You don’t have to waterproof some buildings for up to 80 years (if they have a roof garden). They also have social and economic benefits.” →



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The Obdulla Rodriguez Hospital is one of a number of public hospitals that has installed roof gardens for its patients' comfort and speedy recovery with the support of this scheme.

Colonia Roma, in particular, is home to numerous hip, urban horticultural endeavours. Lily Foster, the founder of Huertos Urbanos, works with local restaurants to establish and maintain producing gardens. In 2015, she will begin a public school garden and kitchen project in collaboration with Mexico City's Education Department and renowned American chef, Alice Waters. "We have the opportunity to teach children at high risk of obesity and diabetes about growing and preparing healthy food," said Foster. "This is such an exciting opportunity to make a lasting impact."

Not far from the Huertos Urbanos headquarters is the thriving Roma Verde community and demonstration garden, a place for city people to get their hands dirty, share new gardening skills and the joys of growing fresh produce.

All are welcome at Mi Verde Morada, a community program that shares vertical gardening skills and produce, and bike repair, theatre and other skilling activities. Vertical gardens are also adorning more and more restaurant walls.

In recent years, Gabriela Rodriguez and her organisation VerdMX have created three vast vertical gardens in highly visible traffic and pedestrian spaces throughout the City.

"VerdMX is a citizen brand, a citizen initiative," said Gabriela. "We started with the idea that communication with good design was the important thing. But now we believe that you need to do actions. These are more powerful than billboards.

"We have learnt a lot from the sculptures. They have served a purpose in terms of raising awareness, but I do not think we would do them again. The maintenance is very intensive and expensive and they are not so ecological as it turns out. They have been very effective at starting a conversation though."

While Mexico City's double-storeyed highway construction and complex mega-city challenges persist, so does its prioritisation of innovative programs to improve air and living quality, environmental awareness and the City's colour palette. 🌿

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