

How we lived through the earthquake in Mexico on September 19th 2017

When the ground began to shake we were visiting the Laboratory of the art restorer, Marlene Sámano, in the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía (National School of Conservation, Restoration & Museography of Mexico, ENCRYM) in Mexico City. She was explaining to several visiting professors the work they carry out in the Laboratory concerning the conservation of traditional building materials and their research into the sap from various plants which, mixed with other materials, can protect the colours and surfaces of walls. She suddenly stopped speaking, interrupting her explanation, staring off into the middle distance. After a moment of thought, she said calmly:

“It’s an earthquake.”

And it was true; the ground was shaking, moving gently as if it were a wave on a pond. The feeling was similar to that of being on a boat. Raising her voice, she continued:

“Everyone must leave calmly, without running, and go to the car park outside! Leave all your things here! We can come back later to get them! Follow me in single file!”

She quickly turned around and calmly went to the door. We all followed her in single file through the corridors and halls. On the upper floors, we could hear the sound of falling objects and breaking glass. Just as we were leaving the building, the alarm went off.

We were a small group of Mexican and Spanish lecturers attending Marlene’s presentation: Luis Fernando Guerrero Baca, from the UAM-Xochimilco, Luis Carlos Bustos from the ENCRYM, Felix Jové and myself from the Universidad de Valladolid. Also in the room was Cristina, the lab assistant, who had been engrossed in her work rather than attending to Marlene’s explanations.

We quickly exited the building, passing underneath a heavy concrete canopy, supported by steel pillars. I thought, “if the canopy collapses at this moment, they will have to scrape us up off the floor”.

There were already many people in the car park and numerous groups were arriving. There was one woman lying on the ground, suffering from an attack of nerves, being attended to by her colleagues. A man was giving instructions with the use of a whistle and a megaphone.

(Whistle) “Form up in groups! Lecturers on one side and service personnel on the other! I want a list of each group!”

(Whistle) “Keep away from the trees! There may be falling branches!”

(Whistle) "You are not allowed to return to the building until one hour has passed!"

(Whistle) "A brigade is examining the building and we cannot enter until they come out! Don't worry about your belongings, we'll get them later!"

Marlene, who until that moment had shown extraordinary self possession, went white as a sheet and seemed on the point of bursting into tears, yet she held on: "My children!"

She tried unsuccessfully to phone her children's school on her mobile and, suddenly, we were all wondering what was happening elsewhere.

"The phone lines are all blocked", someone said.

"There's no wifi", said Marlene.

"That's because there's no electricity", someone else answered.

"Forget Whatsapp", said Luis Fernando, "we'll have to send text messages".

"No, that doesn't work either", said a man who was making a list, noting down the names of all those present. "Everyone in Mexico City is trying to communicate by mobile now". Then he asked:

"Are you the visiting lecturers? Was there anyone else? Write your names here".

I looked around me. The car park of the ENCRYM was full of people gathered in various groups. We were all concentrating on our mobiles, attempting to contact our families and friends to know how they were and to pass on the news that we were well.



One of the groups of workers from the ENCRYM waiting in the car park, immediately after the earthquake.

The ENCRYM building had hardly been damaged at all. It is a solidly built steel structure with walls made of bricks. Later, we were able to see that there were only a few cracks in the brick walls made by the earthquake, apart from the displacement of furniture in the offices and the breakage of some window panes.

Some hours later, having calmed down, we began to receive news of the effects of the earthquake in Mexico City. When we went out onto the streets, we could see that the city was in a state of chaos. There was no underground (service would be resumed that very evening), no electricity (the different sectors of the city were gradually reconnected once the risk of fire had been eliminated), the cars were in gridlock, the traffic lights were not functioning, the pavements were full of people walking, the bus stops overflowing with people waiting for buses.

The impression I had of those first few hours after the earthquake was one of a well organised society, showing discipline and efficiency, suffering from shock after a colossal threat, but one which they were facing stoically, with bravery; a disciplined people, full of courage, ready and willing to collectively fight for their survival.

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