

DEMOGRAPHIA



LEON: CURITIBA IN MEXICO

SUMMARY INFORMATION		Similar To
Urbanized Area* Population	1,150,000	Columbus, Rosario, Liverpool, Perth, Sendai, Toluca
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	80	Cordoba, Toulouse, London (Canada), Hiroshima
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	210	
Population per Square Mile	14,400	Seville, Hiroshima, Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto
Population per Square Kilometer	5,600	
Site of the first privately operated rapid bus system in North America.		
*Continuously built up area		

12 September 2004

Memorandum

To: All Urban Planners and Transit Planners

Re: Trip to Curitiba

You are all aware of the great success of Curitiba's low-cost, high volume rapid bus system. Some of you are even fortunate enough to work in urban areas where the Curitiba experience can be spoken of openly, without fear of professional retribution generated by the railigious fundamentalists who have their priorities mixed up about what should be maximized (ridership, not spending). Despite the large budgets of many transit and planning agencies, it is not always a feasible to justify a trip to Brazil to see Curitiba's rapid bus system in person. Fortunately, Curitiba is being recreated not far from the United States. The place is Leon, Mexico, only 600 miles from the US border and a two hour, \$400 round trip flight from Houston. Leon is Mexico's sixth largest urban area, with more than 1,000,000 residents. Leon now has a rapid busway

system in operation that is in some ways superior to the Curitiba model. A trip to Mexico would probably be less expensive than traveling to the next APTA conference, and it is likely that much more would be learned.



Leon is one of Mexico's least well known urban areas. This more than a million metropolitan area is located 200 miles northwest of Mexico City by four lane roads, largely limited access tollways. It is

approximately 150 miles from Guadalajara by a slightly out-of-the-way tollway route toward Aguascalientes.

Leon appears to be a comparatively prosperous metropolitan area. There are large areas of the city core that contain attractive upper-middle income housing. The main street, Boulevard Adolfo Lopez Mateos, is lined by attractive commercial facilities, such as two Holiday Inns, Sanford's, a Fiesta Americana hotel (a good quality chain that is Mexican owned), Carrefour, a modern enclosed shopping center and the soccer stadium.



This street is also the backbone of Mexico's first bus rapid transit system. The system is called "Optibus," but the name should not lead anyone to conclude that French optical bus guidance technology is used. Currently there are three routes, with unsubsidized service provided by private bus operators. The three routes converge for a few blocks on Boulevard Adolfo Lopez Mateos, where long center-of-the-street stations assign particular areas for each route. Entry to the station requires purchase of a fare, similar to the barrier based systems that are used in rapid busway operations in Curitiba and Porto Alegre. But the Leon system stations are more attractive than the stations in

Curitiba. Rather than the over-confining tubes used in the Brazilian metropolis, the Leon stations are full sized, squared off rather than rounded and of a more human scale. The system is called Optibus, and fans out from the core of the city to the east, north and south. Articulated Volvo buses are used, with high volume doors on the left to allow convenient access to the stations, all of which are in the middle of the street. The stations outside the core are of virtually the same design, but are only long enough to serve the route on the particular street.

The city, like most in former Spanish colonies, has a grid street design, with some diagonal streets. But there is somewhat unusual treatment. South of the Boulevard and east of Carrefour will be found intersections designed as if they are in Barcelona, with the corners cut off in such a manner that the angles are 45 degrees instead of 90 (called "chanflans" in Spanish and "Xanfrans" in Catalan). The grace achieved in Barcelona, however, is not evident here, with the principal difference being that here there is not the income that makes attractive architecture possible. And, in Leon, like Belo Horizonte, an attractive design component, that doubtlessly was some planner's vision, is applied to a small part of the city.

Leon is also different in having metropolitan government. It wasn't really meant to be, but the municipio is sufficiently large that the urban development has not spilled outside the borders. In this regard, Leon is unusual among the world's largest metropolitan areas.



Like elsewhere in Mexico, the housing boom has arrived in Leon, as the policies of the Vicente Fox administration and the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) bring overdue benefits to the country. There is an attractive housing development on the north side of the city, just outside

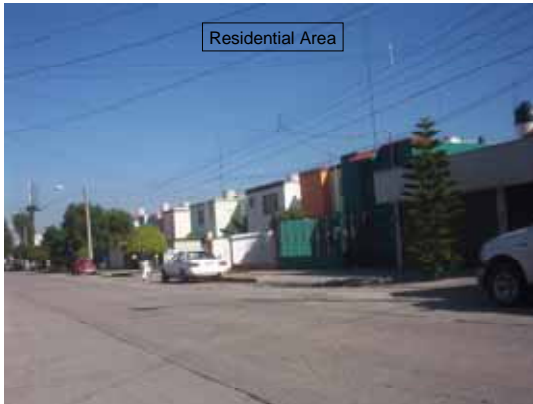
the ring road. The houses sell for under \$40,000 and are small by high-income standards. They are approximately 650 square feet, or one-third the present average for new houses in the United States. But they are very nicely done and would be attractive places to live, though the high-wall enclosed backyard, hardly larger than a small bedroom, would be somewhat confining.



The Mexican Dream

And, as noted above, shoppers in Leon find plenty of opportunity to purchase what they need at competitive prices. The local Carrefour store looks as attractive as any in France, and surely more attractive than the shabby store in Acapulco. In many ways, a drive down Leon's main street looks

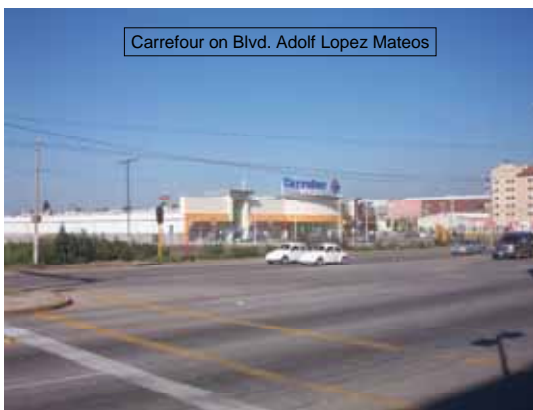
not unlike what might be expected on a modern suburban street in the United States or even Canada.



Residential Area



Residential Area



Carrefour on Blvd. Adolf Lopez Mateos



Street Scene

The Road to Aguascalientes & Guadalajara



By Wendell Cox

www.rentalcartours.net
www.demographia.com
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