

**A VOICE FOR
THE MAP OF MEXICO 1550,
CHRONICLES, LEGENDS
AND ORAL TRADITIONS FROM THE CITY**

Proposal by
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ABSTRACT

The project proposes to create a Commentaries section to the Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550. This is to be done by gathering a selection of Chronicles, Legends, and Oral Traditions of the Historic Center of Mexico City. The tasks involve documentation and recording of citizens narrating the Chronicles and Legends in, or close to, the spaces that they describe. Though many of these locations have changed through the passage of time, the objective is to capture the history and spirit of the place as it is contained in these stories. Once the narratives are gathered in digital video, they will be combined with still images of the city and inserted as another layer to the Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550. The viewer will be able to browse through the Map depicting the colonial city while listening to these narratives.

The project proposes to complete these activities and publish the multimedia materials as an interactive installation and as a net-based work on the Internet. The timetable for completing the work is two months from the starting date.

1. BACKGROUND: THE MAP OF MEXICO 1550

1. 1 About facsimiles

Printed and material facsimiles of historical and archival artifacts are frequently used by scholars for research, as valid replacement for working with the original. In general, a facsimile edition of a historical document will consist of two parts: **Part 1** that is the replica of the object itself and the other **Part 2** containing commentaries and additional information about the item. For reasons of security and preservation, facsimiles are also routinely used in exhibitions by museums and libraries.

In spite of the fact that digitalization could solve many problems regarding access to rare and unique archival materials, traditional image scanning techniques do not properly address many of the needs and issues of museums and libraries that also happen to be major research centers. For one, these methods cannot accurately transfer radiometric and volumetric properties of archival items made of organic materials, such as parchment and vellum, and which through the passage of time have acquired an almost three dimensional topography. Figure 1 depicts an example of such topography as is found in the original Map of Mexico 1550. [6]



Figure 1: Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550. Photogrammetry methods were used to reconstruct the material structure of the artifact.

The map, that is thought to be the work of the noted Spanish cosmographer Alonso de Santa Cruz, is one of only two known maps that give a fairly accurate picture of the city of Mexico and its surrounding regions in the mid 16th century. The map also gives information about the ethnography and the flora and fauna of the region. The population is shown performing a variety of activities, such as woodcutting, canoeing, hunting, and fishing. The approximately 150 glyphs on the map, representing human and animal heads, feet, hands, circles and stars, refer to name places.

(Se Figures 2 and 3.) [4]



Figure 2: Chapultepec detail of the Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550.



Figure 3: Upper right, parish of Santo Domingo. Detail of Digital Facsimile of the Map.

1.2 The Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550

The concept Digital Facsimile denotes a digital representation of the original object of such a high quality, in terms of resolution, color, volume and shape accuracy, that it is accepted by researchers who would normally require to get access to the material version of the object. [1][2] (See Figure 1.) It is a design solution that makes it possible to develop diverse types of digital cultural heritage artifacts targeted to different audiences. Also, the intensive data acquisition strategy presupposed for such a product also ensures that there will be enough for future generation products.

During the years 1997-2004 such an artifact was created of the Map of Mexico 1550. The project that created **Part 1** of the Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550 was realized as a collaborative endeavor between the University of Helsinki, Media Lab, the Helsinki University of Technology, Department of Photogrammetry, and the University of Uppsala Library, that is the keeper of the original item. [1][6] (See Figure 1.) The Digital Facsimile participated, *in lieu* of the original, in the massive Aztecs exhibition held in the United Kingdom and Germany during the years 2002-2004. (See letter from Royal Academy of Arts enclosed.)

Part 2 that would feature Commentaries and Narratives of the Digital Facsimile **has not been created.**

2. PROPOSAL: VOICES IN THE MAP OF MEXICO 1550, THE ORAL TRADITIONS, CHRONICLES, AND LEGENDS FROM THE CITY

The current proposal deals with the creation of **Part 2** of the Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550. This is the Commentaries section that would provide a needed "voice" to the visual artifact and would include documentary video footage gathered in situ. Though it is expected that this section will continue to evolve through time so as to include a growing corpus of historical material, in the beginning, my plan is to design it so that it would show contemporary views accompanied by popular narratives about the city throughout the ages. The initial narratives to be included would focus in particular on the Chronicles and Legends pertaining to the historical center of the city.

As depicted on the Map, the city of Mexico literally emerged from the ruins of the ancient capital of the Aztec empire. Those alive during its early days suffered the same fate of the physical structures. In a city that had been razed to the ground, ancient stone gods, millenarian tribes, and conquerors blended and recycled into the foundation of the Colonial *urbe*. This was the majestic capital of New Spain, center of the first printing atelier and of the first European-style university in the so-called New World. [5]

Indeed, with its historic center declared as Heritage of Humanity, Mexico City, a hybrid metropolis of more than 20 million souls, is a unique place in the world. [3] On the surface, the trace of the historic center resembles the classical Roman checkerboard design. Yet digging deep below is a rhizome structure where the dimensions of multiple histories, real and imagined, conflate to create a new kind of experience worthy of enactment. It can be argued that this experience has been concretized in popular genres such as the Chronicles and Legends.

Like myths, these Chronicles and Legends are stories that are partly based on historical truth and oral narratives. Through the passage of time, and with the interaction with other traditions, these narratives have become part of the collective consciousness of Mexican culture. Some of them illustrate the existence and customs of the indigenous population of the city. Others narrate idiosyncratic events in the lives of the well-to-do Spanish elite. Of particular interest is the dramatic quality and how they are tied to the local urban spaces of the city. Through these aspects, they offer a possibility for alternative views of history to emerge. It is precisely this networked architectural narrative that gathers part of the soul of the city that we propose to reveal by incorporating the Chronicles and Legends to the digital replica of the Map of 1550.

The completed work, which merges the already existing visual artifact and the yet to be created video and sound narratives will be available in two versions. One will be as an interactive installation that can be displayed in public spaces such as museums and libraries in Mexico City where the map has never been exhibited. (See Figure 4.)

The other version will be a net-based work accessible through the Internet. A web-based application that displays a high-resolution image of the map has been created. Like the stand-alone interactive installation, this version lacks content materials that provide a context to the artifact for the viewers. Once the collection of narratives is created, it will be added to this website and made available to the public, including scholars who will, for the first time be able to work with a good version of the Map.

(See Figure 5.)

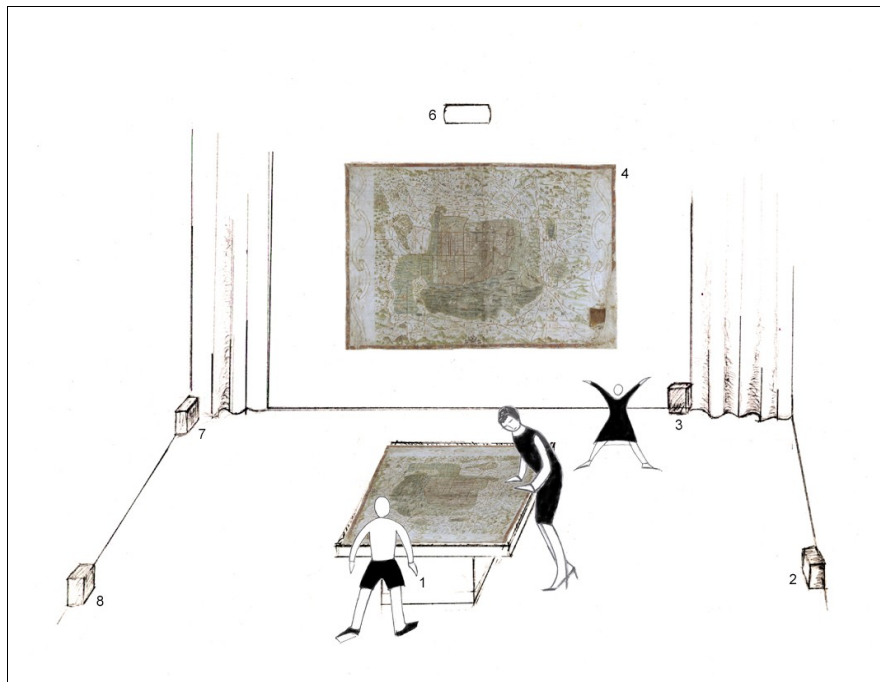


Figure 4: Proposed installation version of the Map of Mexico 1550. Clockwise from right to left: 1. Table with rear projection image and touch screen. User interacts with image on the table and triggers videos and sound files creating a media landscape of the ambience of the city; 2, 3, sound speakers; 4 projected image shows interaction with image on table; 6, video projector for wall image; 7 and 8, sound speakers. Illustration © Lily Díaz-Kommonen, 2004

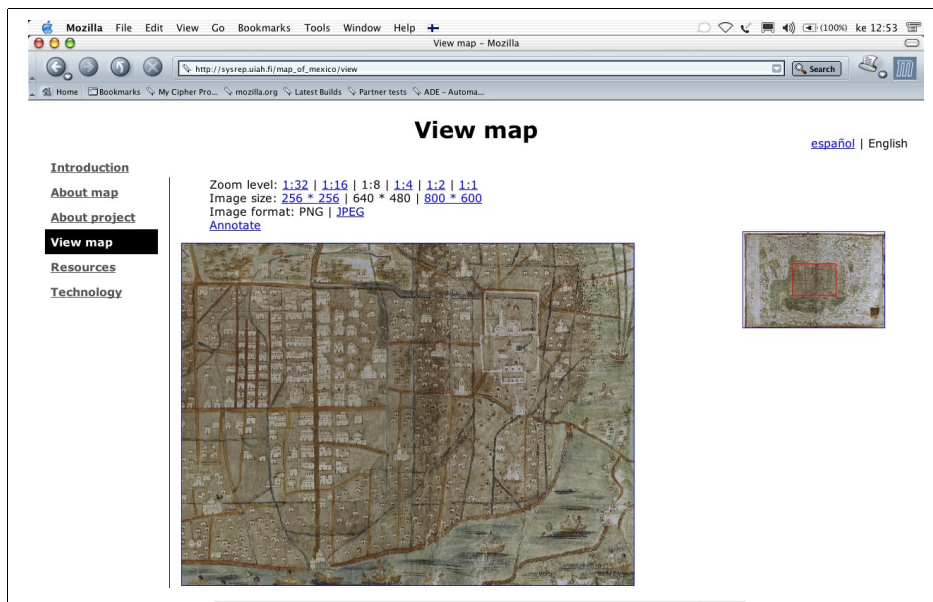


Figure 5: Screen photograph of the web-based application of the Digital Facsimile of the Map of Mexico 1550. The section of the image shows the Historic Center. On the right hand is the convent of San Francisco de Tlatelolco, the site of the first university in America.

3. COLLABORATIVE DESIGN, VIDEO ETHNOGRAPHY, AND PERFORMANCE

3.1 The methods

Chronicles and Legends have been previously compiled in diverse popular media, such as comic books and magazines, and most recently into books. However, I am proposing to gather a new collection in which the stories are narrated and performed by local citizens in *situ*, or close to the architectural spaces that they describe. The idea is to bring together the visual artifact, or work of art that is the Map, with the drama of life in the city.

The collection of narratives, as well sections of the design of the interface for both the installation and the web application, will be created through a collaboration that includes students from the Department of Design of Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico and students from the Media Lab at the University of Art and Design Helsinki. One expert linguist from Mexico, Dr. José Antonio Flores Farfán will be invited as an assessor to the project.

The collection of video narratives and performances gathered in Mexico will be edited and produced into a corpus that will be inserted into the Digital Facsimile. A new interface will incorporate the already existing visual layer of the map as well make use of diverse navigation and search mechanisms to allow for easy access to all the other layers of media. The objective is to create an experience that emotionally and intellectually connects the viewer to the history of and culture of Mexico City.

This will be achieved by combining the layer of the Map that already exists, with new layers containing digital images, video and sound narratives about the traditions and legends of the city.

3.2 The team

During the month of June 2004, I gave a workshop at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico. Through this experience I became acquainted with the personnel and the students there and found support for this project. I have known and collaborated with Dr. Flores Farfán on previous occasions, such as for example in 1999 when we organized a week of activities about Mexican culture in Helsinki.

I propose to make use of the money of the prize to pay stipends to the design students that work with me in the shooting the video footage, the recording of the sound and the narratives, as well as in the design of the interface. My goal is to offer them an educational experience that bridges design education in new media with knowledge about cultural heritage.

Additionally, it is my objective that this project would be the beginning of a dialogue and exchanges between Mexican and Finnish artists, designers, and cultural heritage professionals.

SOURCES:

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