

The Long September 19: Remembering Impermanence in Mexico City

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In early 2018, protestors in Mexico City successfully quashed a monument that the government had proposed to commemorate the victims of the earthquake that struck the city the year prior. While some of these organisers were contesting the misallocation of recovery resources, they regularly told me that, in Mexico City, you can't remember earthquakes. The status of memory had been put into uncanny relief by the earthquake's peculiarity: the 2017 earthquake happened on September 19, the same date as the 1985 earthquake that radically reshaped city space and national politics. On each September 19 post-1985, the Mexican state sought to reestablish its legitimacy by: recognising the "heroes of civil protection", promulgating new building codes, and inaugurating monuments and plazas. Most significantly, the Mexican state developed a public earthquake early warning technology, and used it to stage commemorative evacuation drills each anniversary. September 19 became a day in which the Mexican state could express its contrition for the past disaster by its orientation toward future ones. But this future-past involution contributed to the earthquake's harm: when people heard the earthquake alert on September 19, 2017, they thought it was part of the yearly commemoration, and remained in their buildings until the city began to shake. Now, residents are unsure how, or if, they should remember earthquakes. Building on 20 months of ethnographic research, including the anti-monument protests and the three anniversaries of the 2017 earthquake, I will explore the question: how can forgetting disaster be a form of remembering?

Between commemoration and dark tourism: Remembering disasters in post-disaster contexts