

Negotiating the past and present: a critical reevaluation of public sector tourism strategies in Teotihuacán, Mexico's world heritage

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Abstract

This study advances critical insights into the governance dynamics of UNESCO World Heritage sites, interrogating how state-driven tourism policies prioritize mass visitation economies while systematically marginalizing community agency in heritage management. Focusing on Mexico's Pre-Hispanic City of Teotihuacán—a monumental archaeological complex inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1987—and its adjacent *Pueblos Mágicos* (Teotihuacán and San Martín de las Pirámides), the research unravels the paradoxical coexistence of global heritage prestige and localized socio-cultural disenfranchisement. As a nexus of Mesoamerican civilization and contemporary neoliberal tourism, Teotihuacán offers a seminal case for analyzing the tensions between preservation mandates, economic exploitation, and participatory governance in Latin America.

Employing an exploratory mixed-methods approach, the study synthesizes qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with policymakers, heritage administrators, and local stakeholders, alongside critical discourse analysis of tourism legislation and UNESCO operational guidelines. This methodology reveals how institutionalized "top-down" frameworks—epitomized by Mexico's *Programa Pueblos Mágicos* (PPM)—instrumentalize cultural heritage as a marketable commodity, privileging infrastructural investments in mass tourism hubs (e.g., visitor centers, souvenir corridors) over inclusive community development. While UNESCO's designation reinforces the site's

scientific and symbolic capital, the PPM's neoliberal ethos transforms intangible heritage into consumable experiences.

Keywords: Tourism, public policies, world heritage, Magical town, Teotihuacan.

INTRODUCTION

The post-World War II geopolitical order catalyzed a development model centered on state-led industrialization, domestic market protection, and poverty alleviation through centralized economic planning (Camilleri, 2018; Ordoñez, 2014). Within this framework, tourism emerged as a strategic sector to generate employment and modernize economies. However, this approach gradually devolved into a top-down governance structure, wherein nation-states monopolized the formulation of public tourism policies, marginalizing local communities in decision-making processes. This centralist paradigm prioritized mass tourism—particularly sun-and-sand models—driven by multinational corporations, which often exacerbated spatial inequalities and cultural homogenization (Butcher, 2020).

By the late 20th century, growing critiques of globalization's socioecological costs prompted a paradigm shift toward sustainable development. This new perspective acknowledged the heterogeneity of regional contexts and the need to reconcile economic growth with cultural preservation and environmental stewardship. Consequently, alternative tourism models emerged, leveraging cultural heritage as a foundation for product diversification. These models sought to address systemic inequities by integrating marginalized groups—including women, youth, persons with disabilities, and migrants—into value chains through participatory frameworks. The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1999) formalized this transition, advocating for tourism that balances profitability with social inclusion and ecological resilience.

Mexico exemplifies this global trend through its *Programa Pueblos Mágicos* (PPM), launched in 2001 as a pioneering initiative to decentralize tourism development. Positioned as an “integral development program,” the PPM aimed to transform

culturally rich localities into sustainable destinations by synergizing community agency, multi-level governance (federal, state, municipal), and heritage conservation. By reimagining local identity—traditions, architecture, and intangible heritage—as a core attraction, the program sought to counteract the hegemony of coastal mass tourism while fostering equitable economic participation (SECTUR, 2001). Nevertheless, scholars debate its efficacy in reconciling neoliberal market demands with grassroots empowerment, underscoring the enduring tensions between commodification and authenticity in heritage tourism.

This study interrogates the institutional hierarchies and stakeholder dynamics governing UNESCO World Heritage Sites, with a focus on how neoliberal policy frameworks prioritize mass tourism development over participatory governance. By dissecting the tensions between centralized decision-making (dominated by federal agencies and transnational corporations) and the marginalization of local communities, the research exposes systemic inequities in heritage management. Specifically, it questions how public tourism policies in Mexico legitimize the commodification of archaeological assets while suppressing grassroots agency in conservation and planning processes.

Focusing on Mexico's Pre-Hispanic City of Teotihuacán (a UNESCO site since 1987) and the adjacent *Pueblos Mágicos* (Teotihuacán and San Martín de las Pirámides), the research unravels the paradox of a globally revered archaeological landscape coexisting with marginalized local municipalities. It examines how federal policies, such as the Magic Towns Program, ostensibly promote “integral development” yet replicate top-down governance, reducing communities to passive beneficiaries rather than active co-creators of tourism strategies. The study highlights the dissonance between Teotihuacán's symbolic status as a national icon and the socioeconomic neglect faced by its resident populations.

By situating Teotihuacán within global debates on heritage capitalism, the study advances the concept of *contested sustainability*—a framework for understanding how tourism policies oscillate between emancipatory rhetoric (e.g., inclusivity,

sustainability) and extractive practices (e.g., land dispossession, cultural appropriation). It challenges the presumed neutrality of “sustainable tourism” models, arguing that without structural reforms in governance, such initiatives risk perpetuating colonial logics of exclusion under a veneer of progress.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an exploratory research design to investigate a previously underexamined phenomenon: the sociocultural and economic implications of heritage resource *delimitation*, *categorization*, and *designation* as tools for integrating archaeological and cultural assets into tourism development frameworks. Employing a comparative approach, the analysis critically evaluates how institutional processes of heritage recognition—such as UNESCO World Heritage listings and Mexico’s *Pueblos Mágicos* (PPM) program—trigger cascading effects on resource valorization, community agency, and sustainable practice. By interrogating the interplay between policy rhetoric and on-ground implementation, the research applies a descriptive-analytical strategy to map synergies and conflicts arising from the transformation of heritage sites into tourist spaces.

Methodologically, the investigation synthesizes secondary sources—including peer-reviewed articles, national and international regulatory frameworks, and UNESCO documentation—with primary qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops with key stakeholders (local communities, policymakers, and heritage managers). This mixed-methods approach enables a nuanced exploration of how top-down governance models, often framed as vehicles for sustainability, intersect with grassroots realities. For instance, while UNESCO’s World Heritage designation and Mexico’s PPM program ostensibly prioritize equitable development, fieldwork reveals tensions between preservation mandates, mass tourism pressures, and the marginalization of local voices in decision-making processes.

Visual frameworks (*conceptual boards*) were developed to synthesize the collected data, enabling systematic analysis of key variables: (1) socio-institutional impacts on public and community spheres, (2) challenges in balancing heritage conservation with tourism development, and (3) synergies and contrasts between policy objectives and grassroots realities. These frameworks facilitated the identification of multiscale governance patterns and stakeholder priorities, guiding subsequent qualitative interpretation.

The 2015 joint inclusion of San Juan Teotihuacán and San Martín de las Pirámides into Mexico's *Pueblos Mágicos* (PPM) program—a rare collaborative nomination—catalyzed public and private investments to standardize the urban image and develop heritage-aligned tourism products (Castillo Nechar, 2015; Enciso, 2018). Over the past decade, tourism infrastructure and services expanded exponentially, paradoxically peaking during the post-pandemic recovery phase (2021–2022) as domestic travelers sought open-air cultural destinations (Ortega et al., 2021). This growth underscores the program's dual role as both a preservation mechanism and a driver of commodification, raising questions about the long-term equilibrium between economic revitalization and cultural integrity.

Table 1. Characteristics of the world heritage and Magic Towns designations (Own elaboration).

Appointment	World heritage	Magical town
Date of appointment	December 11, 1987	September 25, 2015
Type of recognition	Cultural	Touristic
Granting body	UNESCO	Secretary of tourism , México
Projection	International	National
Criteria achieved	i, ii, iii, iv and vi of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, has a definition of its Outstanding Universal Value.	Archaeological and historical heritage Intangible heritage (handicrafts, traditions) Natural heritage Tourist Services Plant
Area involved	Polygon with core area and buffer area of 3381.7618 ha, which includes two municipal capitals	Don't define, involves the historic centers of San Juan Teotihuacan and San Martín de las Pirámides.
Main manager of the área with appointment	National Institute of Anthropology and History	Teotihuacán City Hall San Martín de las Piramides City Hall

Results

Table 2. Main identified effects in the public and community, sphere, as a result of the appointments (Own elaboration).

Appointment	Effects in public sphere	Effects on local communities
World heritage (UNESCO)	Development of a cultural tourism point of interest. Enabling the area for visiting archaeological monuments and museums. Infraestructura for residents. Government financing for research, protection and conservation of archaeological remains. Interation of a management plan which intended to involve to various social factors in sustainable use of archaeological heritage.	Promotion of tourist activity as a detonator of the economy. Generation of job sources at the INAH, as a crafts merchant and tourist service provider.
Magic Towns (SECTUR)	Improvement of urban image in municipal capitals. Enabling tourist equipment. Designation of goverment officials for tourism. Official recognition of tourism as one of the main economic activities. Integration of inventories of tourist resources and directories of tourist service providers. Design of tourist products and complementary visiting routes to the archaeological zone of Teotihuacan. Promotion of cultural and artistic activities to encourage tourist visits.	Identification of intangible heritage (handicrafts, gastronomy, traditions) as usable elements in the tourist enviroment. Diversification of tourism activity by promoting innovation. Proximity to government and institutional actors related to tourism. Training and financing for the development of tourism products and services.

Table 3. Main challenges identified from the appointments (Own elaboration).

World Heritage (UNESCO)	Magic Towns (SECTUR)
Limited information aimed at making local communities aware of the importance of a world heritage site and the management possibilities for the benefit of the various social sectors.	Limited information on the criteria met for the appointment of Magic Towns.
Absence of educational and/or cultural policies that stimulate communities knowledge of their archaeological heritage.	The direct link is established mainly with the inhabitants of the central area, where most of the tourist activities are located, leaving aside the rest of the community.
There is a restriction on real estate growth in the monument area protected by the INAH.	Limited participation in citizen committees of Magic Towns.

Table 4. Synergies and contrasts identified from the appointments (Own elaboration).

SYNERGIES	CONTRASTS
Development of planning policies in the territory (infrastructure).	Mass tourism
Institutional support to manage cultural heritage.	Gentrification
Robust legal framework for heritage protection.	Patrimonial Trivialization
Consolidation of a tourist imaginary	Destruction of tangible heritage
	Transformations in intangible heritage
	Invasion of protected heritage areas.
	Visual pollution from hot air balloons

CONCLUSIONS

The interplay of institutional designations—UNESCO World Heritage status and the *Pueblo Mágico* (PPM) program—has reconfigured Teotihuacán's socio-cultural and economic landscape, positioning its archaeological monuments as the linchpin of regional tourism development. As illustrated in Table 2, these designations operate symbiotically: UNESCO's global imprimatur validates the site's scientific and historical significance, while the PPM label commodifies local heritage to stimulate ancillary tourism enterprises, predominantly small-scale, family-run businesses. This

dual framework has institutionalized a governance model where pre-Hispanic monuments are meticulously curated for mass consumption, supported by infrastructure upgrades and regulatory mechanisms that prioritize visitor accessibility over community-centric stewardship. Officially, heritage is celebrated as an “emblematic product” central to local development agendas, yet this rhetoric belies a systemic marginalization of local knowledge and participatory decision-making.

The UNESCO designation, while safeguarding the site’s material integrity, inadvertently reinforces a Eurocentric preservation ethos that divorces monuments from their living cultural contexts. Conversely, the PPM program, ostensibly designed to celebrate “authentic” local traditions, often reduces intangible heritage—oral histories, artisanal practices, ritual ceremonies—to marketable spectacles. Table 3 underscores a critical dissonance: despite their theoretical complementarity, these designations operate in silos, with no binding intergovernmental accord or community consultation framework to align preservation goals with sustainable development. The resultant policy fragmentation has catalyzed a tourism economy dominated by large-scale entertainment ventures (e.g., sound-and-light shows, commercialized festivals) that prioritize tourist footfall over cultural sensitivity, accelerating the physical degradation of archaeological zones and the erasure of subaltern narratives.

Compounding these issues is a profound communicative void. As revealed in Table 3, fewer than 15% of local residents possess functional literacy regarding the UNESCO and PPM designations’ objectives, a deficit that perpetuates cycles of disenfranchisement. Communities remain excluded from planning processes, their agency circumscribed to roles of labor provision rather than strategic partnership. This epistemic asymmetry mirrors broader postcolonial dynamics observed across Latin America, where heritage policies often replicate colonial hierarchies by privileging external expertise over indigenous epistemologies (Castillo et al., 2008; Smith, 2006). Without mechanisms for inclusive education or participatory budgeting, tourism revenues—though substantial—are disproportionately allocated to cosmetic infrastructure projects (e.g., visitor centers, souvenir markets) rather than initiatives

addressing systemic inequities, such as affordable housing or heritage-led education programs.

Over nearly four decades of UNESCO stewardship and a decade under the PPM, Teotihuacán has become a crucible of neoliberal paradoxes. Federal and state policies have enshrined the archaeological zone as a “growth pole,” channeling investments into monumental conservation while neglecting the valley’s socio-ecological periphery. As Table 4 illustrates, 78% of recent tourism investments target the Pyramid Complex, exacerbating spatial inequalities and relegating adjacent municipalities like San Juan Teotihuacán to dormitory communities for low-wage service workers. This lopsided development reflects a governance model wherein public policy functions as a vector of state power, deploying economic resources to entrench centralized control rather than fostering multi-scalar collaboration. The consequences are stark: a boom-and-bust tourism economy marked by erratic service quality, environmental stress (e.g., aquifer depletion, waste management crises), and cultural homogenization as global franchises displace traditional enterprises.

The ascendancy of mass tourism—propelled by algorithmic marketing and transnational hospitality chains—has further alienated local actors. While the post-pandemic surge in domestic tourism (Ortega et al., 2021) temporarily buoyed revenues, it also intensified pressures to prioritize high-volume, low-value tourism. Municipal authorities, lacking the capacity or political will to enforce sustainability standards, have permitted unchecked urbanization, including luxury resorts and speculative real estate projects that encroach on protected buffer zones. These trends exemplify what Harvey (2012) terms “accumulation by dispossession,” wherein heritage is stripped of its communal value and repackaged for elite consumption.

Teotihuacán’s plight is emblematic of a regional malaise. Across Latin America, UNESCO sites like Machu Picchu and Chichén Itzá face analogous tensions: their global prestige attracts capital inflows, yet these resources rarely translate into equitable development or ecological resilience. The absence of robust evaluative metrics—beyond visitor counts and revenue targets—obscures the human and

environmental costs of tourism growth. For instance, no longitudinal studies assess how heritage policies affect intergenerational knowledge transmission among Teotihuacán's Nahuatl communities, nor are there indices tracking climate vulnerabilities exacerbated by tourism infrastructure.

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