

# Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational Experience No. 45



**JARILLAS AND  
SOCIAL FABRIC**

## 1968

*Jarillas, elsewhere better known as Caña Brava (a type of cane), is a reed that usually grows on the marshy banks of rivers. Tlacotal, the Nahuatl name for the place where jarillas grow, is a community in Iztacalco, one of the mayorships in the southeast of Mexico City. The Miramontes River, at that time emblematic for Tlacotal, became a canal; but the jarillas are still in the orchard of the Cultural Center that bears the same name. This cultural center is a reference for Mexico City for being managed from the territorial community, cohesing the social fabric and the sense of community at the scale of the neighborhood locality, with a tireless work from the culture and urban identity. It is an icon for the development and self-determination of an urban community, involving the third generation, giving tangible form to the demands of the people of Tlacotal in their struggle for the right to the city.*

The student movements, both in Europe and America, particularly in Mexico, turned 1968 into a moment of protests and a dawning of a new era, demanding and achieving the first transformations of the old order and political and social status quo. In the heat of this moment, young people began to carry out all kinds of cultural activities in the community of Gabriel Ramos Millán, Tlacotal section, but from a consciousness of identity all the people continue to call it in Nahuatl: Tlacotal. Due to the lack of a place, cultural activities began to take place for the community, including music, dance and theater in the street. Silvia Alcántara, Ana Morales and Miguel González, Yolanda Alcántara, Roberto Cuevas, Miguel Mejía, Alejandra Nuñez, Ana Carmen Reséndiz, José Cardenas and many others were - and most of them still are - part of a citizens' collective that organized itself to fight in collaborative work for the improvement of neighborhood conditions, habitat and for the use of public spaces with a social function, in



self-management and at the service of the community.

The group in 1997, living the very busy political and social situation of Mexico in those years, decided to organize meetings with various social groups in the territory due to the problem of violence inside and outside the house in Tlacotal. The diagnosis made in the community, consulting 900 women, men and also young people about their aspirations for their territory; the main conclusion is the demand of the people in terms of cultural activities and particularly to have a place for youth in the neighborhood. Politicians generally do not go down the path of participatory diagnoses because they seem to think they know what the people want and need. Miguel González, one of the persons who has been part of this process from the beginning, explains a little of the context, from where this demand to promote culture arose: *"The proposal of our work and of the Las Jarillas center has been from the beginning to understand and comprehend culture as a way to prevent crime through culture, sports and to*

*contribute to improve life and coexistence in the community here in Tlacotal".*

## **LAS JARILLAS - CULTURAL CENTER**

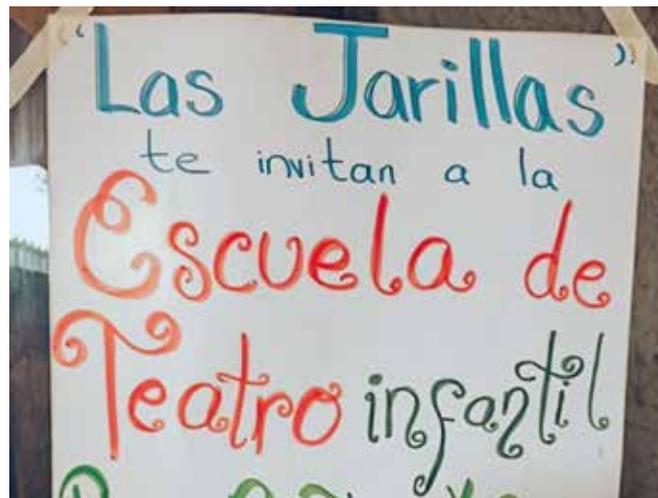
To this day, Silvia Alcántara, Ana Morales, Miguel González and many other people, all of them living in the community, belong to the group of cultural promoters, neighbors of Tlacotal. They had located a vacant lot, situated at the entrance to the colony, which everyone knew as the curve and which served as a clandestine dump where drugs were moved; in their opinion, this site was suitable for building a cultural center for their cultural project. Thanks to a more progressive political current in the delegation, now the mayor's office of Iztacalco, the collective succeeded after endless meetings and requests in the year 2000 that the mayor's office build a facility as a house of culture on the site of the curve. It was a small 2-story center, at first with little or almost no equipment,



but this did not stop the collective to inaugurate the center in April 2002, with space to start activities with a book-club, poetry, homework and other topics.

In subsequent years, the center's offerings have grown: courses in Salsa, HipHop, ballet and contemporary dance, children's theater and playroom, digital laboratory, bio-garden, food production workshops, recycling and waste management activities, Taekwondo classes, podiatry care, biomagnetism, psychological care, weaving and handicrafts such as mandalas, among others. The monthly number of different educational, socio-political training, cultural and sports activities now reaches almost fifty and the center is frequented by more than eight hundred people per month, almost all from the local community. At the same time, the house of culture as a center is getting more equipment and step by step the physical structure of the center itself is being expanded: third floor, an event room, rooms for meetings, courses and dance, as well as a small cafeteria and

reception on the first floor. In addition, in order to carry out on-site practices for demonstration purposes, some rooms on the upper floor are built with earth walls (bahareque) and a bio-garden, hydroponic crops and greenhouses, composting and vermiculture, the installation of biotechniques such as solar panels, rainwater harvesting and filtering are implemented, achieving very interesting levels of autonomy in terms of electricity and drinking water. In this way, for example, the monthly electricity bill dropped from six thousand to one hundred pesos (approx. from 300 to 5 dollars): something similar happens with the use of rainwater, filtering, storing and supplying almost all the consumption required for the operation of the center and the garden.



The space in Las Jarillas is very well used, following the idea of achieving social and environmental sustainability. This idea is transmitted to participants of the various courses and workshops offered, having achieved replications with the implementation of eco-techniques and urban agriculture in common spaces of private housing complexes and in areas of the zone. These pilot projects were carried out with the active participation of neighbors, beneficiary families and the support of civil organizations and institutions, as well as companies.

Given the high levels of pollution caused by vehicular traffic in the area, alternatives have also been generated to reduce pollution through non-polluting transportation and bicycle paths.

For Las Jarillas, having a house with space and equipment has made it possible to grow in terms of offerings, processes and dynamics. By this time, the collective promoting the house had already understood that the ties between the community and the

house of culture were of vital importance; these ties were achieved through open, permanent and back-and-forth communication. To avoid falling into decadence, Las Jarillas to this day continues to exist also in the street, where it was born; at least once a month the house of culture organizes an activity in the streets of the neighborhood.

## **POLICE NO, CULTURE YES**

The conquests and consolidation of the house of culture were not always easy. There was no lack of political authorities, accustomed to making decisions by hand and from above, without admitting co-management from the community of the territory. It happened that one authority ordered the closing of the center with police support, in view of his annoyance at the autonomous attitude of the neighborhood collective. Las Jarillas had decided not to support any political party in exchange for material benefits. The community of Tlaco-



tal, fully identifying itself with Las Jarillas, defended its space not only by removing the police but also by suing the intellectual author of the intervention.

In 2003, with current Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador as the former head of government of Mexico City, a security program was launched with a large budget to equip the police. Las Jarillas' response to this program was as blunt as it was predictable: police no - culture yes.

People have little confidence in the police and the Las Jarillas collective has always been committed to culture to prevent crime instead of repression. After several meetings and a firm stance on the part of the collective, the local public administration agreed that 80% of the resources would be invested in culture and sports. A soccer championship is organized for girls and boys of the neighborhood with the participation of 36 teams. Miguel González recalls: *"Through the soccer tournament we*

were able to get closer not only to the children but also through them to their parents; gradually the neighborhood, instead of handing over their children at the door of Las Jarillas, became involved in the activities at home, which made it possible to work on issues such as domestic violence and many other topics, which are generally difficult to address". Local youths with drug addiction problems were involved as referees during the tournament.

The process that Tlacotal underwent, from which the Las Jarillas cultural center emerged, is something special that is rarely seen in Mexico City, since it is an initiative and experience that was born from the territory with the active participation of its inhabitants, where the community eventually manages to become part of and take control of its center. Las Jarillas is a member of the Mexico City Neighborhood Improvement Collective (Colectivo de Mejoramiento Barrial de la Ciudad de México), which brings together the city's community



self-management collectives.

In order to combat delinquency and drug addiction among young people, the Mexico City Administration, inspired by examples similar to that of the Las Jarillas culture house, built and equipped 300 centers

called PILARES (Pillars: Points of Innovation, Freedom, Art, Education and Knowledge) in different neighborhoods and areas of the city's municipalities, partly with resources that were previously efficiently allocated to the Program for the Improvement of Neighborhoods and Urban Spaces, which has since disappeared. Unlike Las Jarillas, the initiative and operation of these centers depends on the public administration, with full interference of politicians and public operators of the respective area where they are located. Although the intention and the measure is good, it is a determination from above; PILARES is without a 'solid base' that implies history, a process of struggle, efforts, contributions and community achievements to ensure a sense of belonging, identification and sustainability.

Faced with this panorama and the constant attempts to control and instrumentalize the house of culture Las Jarillas by the interests of the political class and adding to this the constant uncertainty regarding the legal situation of ownership of the

entire infrastructure of the house, it can be affirmed that it has been an important achievement to achieve the recognition of the governing council of Las Jarillas by the authorities through an agreement. This governing council, composed of people from the community to manage the destiny of the center, assumes the coordination and at the same time guarantees the functioning of the house of culture.

In addition to different supports from the public administration, which were arduously won by the Las Jarillas collective, it has obtained cooperation from various civil associations such as the Viva - Environmental Housing Program, from foundations such as Isla Urbana, from companies such as ALAS Cultiva tu Espacio, which collaborate under the concept of social responsibility, and even from the Green Party of Germany on the occasion of its visit to the center. As of 2003, the Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento A.C. - Copevi, a non-governmental entity with technical expertise in housing

and habitat, eco-techniques and particularly in work related to the right to the city, became, step by step, a permanent ally. This accompaniment continues to this day, thanks in part to the support of the German cooperation agency Misereor to Copevi.

It is worth mentioning that with the support of Copevi and in joint work with the Collective of Social and Civil Organizations for Participatory Democracy in Iztacalco (Coscidepi), of which the Las Jarillas culture house and the Iztacalco School for the Construction of Citizenship are part, the participation of neighbors in the construction of the Iztacalco Charter for the Right to the City, the first charter in Mexico in which the experiences of Jarillas were considered, was encouraged. It concluded in 2012, having achieved a broad process of social participation that generated from its space important strategic lines for the development of both Iztacalco and the city. The book entitled "Another city grows within the city" (Mexico City, April, 2015) systematizes the experience and cons-



truction process of the Iztacalco Charter. Contents of this are included in the Charter of Mexico City for the Right to the City and in its new Constitution, approved in 2017.

In this way, it has been possible to influence urban issues of utmost importance and that concern the entire city.

## WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT?

Those who have known other houses of culture in the city, agree in their appreciation, saying that Las Jarillas is different. Maricela Reséndiz, taekwondo teacher, and Nora Leticia Romero, urban agriculture instructor, have worked, teaching in

their disciplines in many entities, including houses of culture, administered by the public sector. Both agree that the dynamics and warmth in the operation of the Las Jarillas center is incomparable to other houses of culture. They say that despite the fact that no one in the coordinating group receives a salary or perhaps just because of the general volunteerism, the users receive very good attention; despite the notorious scarcity of financial resources, there is never a lack of organizational and housekeeping resources at Las Jarillas. Students often help with the cleaning of their spaces at Las Jarillas. To participate in courses and workshops, people pay a modest fee. The economic resources generated by payments, in the case of courses and workshops, are distributed as follows: 80% for the workshop participants and 20% for Jarillas' maintenance needs. In the houses of culture under the tuition of the public administration, everything is free, without contribution; but even so, the teachers explain that there is more attendance, interest and permanence in the courses offered by Las Jarillas.



There are many testimonies of people who say that at the beginning they brought their children to different recreational and cultural activities at the house of culture. But then they experienced that as adults they could also get involved with the center. Parents who hardly used to leave their children for activities at the Casa de la Cultura, now offer their children to spend time together at the playroom in Las Jarillas.

It is no small feat for Las Jarillas to get young and not-so-young people to leave their tablet or cell phone screens to share with others in the playroom or other cultural and community activities. Yolotl González, daughter of one of the pioneers of Las Jarillas belongs to the second-generation group; the third generation is going to the center's recreational activities; for her there is no doubt. "Las Jarillas has transformed the chip for many people in the neighborhood".

It is not possible to understand the Las Jarillas cultural center



without understanding the process that has led to the creation of the center: it is a process that starts from the people for the people, it is a construction from the territory, it is a community manifestation of rootedness, of defense of the territory and of the urban identity strengthened by the local power of the citizens and from their vision with the promo-

tion of concrete measures of sustainable contribution to the city. This process was strengthened by Copevi's accompaniment, also in the construction of the Iztacalco charter for the right to the city, which was a milestone in the process of political vindication of Las Jarillas, enriched by its most valuable capital: its community life.

## OUT OF CURIOSITY I ENTERED

Joselín González teaches ballet courses at the center. "I went in out of curiosity to get to know the house of culture. From the façade of the house you can see how different it is". And Antonio Cortes, HipHop teacher, adds: "Here the community helped out. I decided to teach here and I love working in a team, as well as getting to know the

other areas of the house, such as the bio-garden. But I confess that at first I entered with a lot of caution since we have become accustomed to toxic environments. But here it is different". The women teachers at Las Jarillas say: "Here we feel free to carry out our activities and there is not so much male chauvinism". There are many people who, whether or not they live in Tlacotal, came here out of curiosity; the children of the founders of the center indicate that they grew up in a community

where the house of culture began to form part of their lives. Many of them now bring their own children to Las Jarillas.

Alex Murietta is a resident of Tlacotal who has known Las Jarillas since its beginnings. "The things of culture or community centers, usually happen under the management of the public administration and where they don't even let you use the bathroom. Las Jarillas is a myth in Iztacalco because it is the great exception".



## BETWEEN OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

With each new administration in the mayor's office, there is a risk that the authorities will try to weaken the autonomy or instrumentalize Las Jarillas, generating budgetary dependence and replacing the principle of horizontality (from the community for the community), since in Mexican politics verticality generally continues to rule. The

community of the territory, in more than one case, has been the protective shield of the house of culture. The governing council of Las Jarillas is characterized by its clarity in terms of its principles and its defense of them; at the same time there is always a dialogic and proactive attitude. On several occasions and faithful to the position of wanting public policies where there is room for community participation, there has been a very collaborative attitude towards public authorities, who have shown interest in taking into account the principles of Las Jarillas to permeate other existing and new houses of culture and community centers. For Las Jarillas, one of the lessons learned throughout the process is the importance of achieving fluid communication between everyone. In this sense there is an open door policy.

But, apparently, the good intentions of some authorities are not enough and the problem is not the lack of budget but the inability to share power and govern from and with the people.



## MESSAGES TO THE FUTURE

Changing the chip means leaving the tablet or cell phone screen to share with others in the playroom or other cultural, educational and community activities.

Autonomy in community processes requires constant involvement and volunteering but helps to avoid vulnerability of all kinds.

The inclusion of citizens in the conception of public spaces for coexistence, culture, recreation and their appropriation contribute to social, ecological and cultural transformation.

Strengthening the sense of community and the social fabric through the promotion of culture and rootedness to the territory is a solid basis for self-determination and good shared living.

# Almanac of the Future

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