

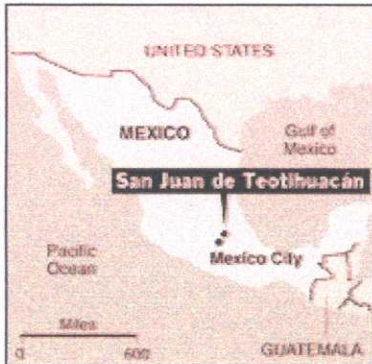
New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/28/international/americas/28mexico.html?ex=1254110400&en=9f21ee7203878784&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt>

No, the Conquistadors Are Not Back. It's Just Wal-Mart.

By JAMES C. McKINLEY Jr.

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Henry Romero/Reuters

In early September, construction workers were laying in tin roofing for the sprawling store. The Pyramid of the Sun is in the background.

SAN JUAN DE TEOTIHUACÁN, Mexico, Sept. 21 - The market in this small town is a warren of streets with canopied stalls and battered storefronts, where one can buy everything from fresh avocados to jeans to a vaquero's saddle.

As they have for centuries, the merchants here ply their trade midway between the ruins of giant pyramids built by the Maya and the stone steeple of the town's main Catholic church, which Spanish monks founded in 1548.

Now another colossus from a different empire is being built in the shadow of the pyramids, a structure some merchants and other townsfolk here say threatens not only their businesses but their heritage. In December, an ugly cinderblock building rising from the earth is to house a sprawling supermarket called Bodega Aurrera, a subsidiary of Wal-Mart of Mexico.

"What's next?" said David García, 27, whose family owns a dry-goods store in the market. "It's like having Mickey Mouse on the top of the Pyramid of the Moon."

The 71,902-square-foot store with 236 parking places is about a mile from a gated park where tourists flock to some of Mexico's best-known ruins, a complex of pyramids and other structures

built between the fifth and ninth centuries and later called by the Aztecs "the place where men became gods."

How Wal-Mart got permission to build a superstore on farmland supposedly protected under Mexican law as an archaeological site has vexed the merchants here, who freely accuse the town, the state and the federal Institute of Anthropology and History of corruption.

The opponents charge Wal-Mart with trampling on their Indian heritage and suggest that the backhoes clawing at the earth on the site are destroying irreplaceable relics.

But an economic reality underlies this dispute - Wal-Mart has not only built stores throughout Mexico, but has taken over several other chains. It is the largest private employer in the country, and wherever this American retail titan erects a new outlet, the local merchants tend to disappear, or at least lose business.

"It's a crime," said Irma González Rodríguez, 40, who sells chickens in the market. "They say they will bring 200 jobs. How many people are you going to leave without jobs for those 200?"

"The ruins and us go together. We are part of this culture. They will leave us without work, without anything."

Nonsense, say state and local officials, who approved the project, as they do most things, without any public hearings. Mayor Guillermo Rodríguez Céspedes said there were no more than 20 opponents, people who were afraid of losing business. He points out that Wal-Mart is promising to bring 180 jobs to a town struggling with unemployment. He angrily denounced the grumbling about corruption at City Hall as lies.

Archaeologists at the federal institute also defend their decision to let the project go ahead. True, a small pre-Hispanic altar of clay and stone was discovered under what will be an expansive parking lot, along with a few other artifacts, said Sánchez Nava, an official with the institute.

But most of the artifacts have already been recovered from the area where the supermarket is being built. Besides, he said, teams of archaeologists from the institute are at the site each day, watching over the work. "I don't feel there is a risk," he said.

Opponents say the government is misleading people. They say they have found what look like pottery shards, arrows and other relics in the earth excavated from the construction site. They point out that Maribel Miró Flaquer, who approved the project for the institute, resigned shortly afterward. Her successor, Raúl Javier Córdoba García, died of unknown causes after only a week in office.

All this has fed the rumor mill on the town's streets, talk of corruption and murder, charges officials call pure fiction. Some compare Wal-Mart's invasion of the pyramid area to the Spanish conquest.

Ever since Wal-Mart entered the retail market by taking over Cifra, a Mexican retailer, in 1991, it has gobbled up a greater and greater share of consumer spending. It now owns more than 650 department stores, restaurants and supermarkets in six chains. It rakes in revenues of more than \$11 billion a year, greater than the other top three discount retailers combined. In February, it announced plans to open 77 new stores this year and next.

Raúl Argüelles, a spokesman for Wal-Mart of Mexico, says the company's only motive for building a store here is to bring lower prices for basic goods to consumers. People here now have to trek 30 miles to the nearest hypermarket, he points out, and pay higher prices in the old-fashioned market. He characterized the protesters, who on one occasion threatened the site with sticks and machetes, as a handful of malcontents. "The community wants the store," he said.

But the opponents have been joined by some intellectuals, like the poet Homero Aridjis, who in early September intoned that building a shopping center in sight of the pyramids amounted to "driving the stake of globalization into the heart of Mexican antiquity."

Emmanuel D'Herrera, a schoolteacher and former diplomat who lives near the pyramids, said the federal archaeologists relied on surveys to give their approval. He said the construction crews started digging three weeks before government archaeologists arrived, a charge that could not be verified.

"We see an awful corruption all around that stinks, from INAH to the mayor's office," said Mr. D'Herrera, using the acronym for the archaeological institute. "We want to preserve our heritage. It's not a common piece of land."

Others here are more pragmatic. Francisco Briseño has sold cheese, ham, soap, bridles, saddles and other necessities from his tiny shop in the market for 40 years. He does not care much about ancient history. Asked what would happen when the big store opened, he shrugged and said everyone else would lose some business. Still, he has faith in his clientele.

"I don't think they are going to abandon me," he said, smiling broadly, as if to say nothing ever really changes here, even when it does.

Correction: Sept. 30, 2004, Thursday

Because of an editing error, an article on Tuesday about opposition to plans by Wal-Mart's Mexico subsidiary to build a large supermarket near the ancient pyramid ruins of Teotihuacán, near Mexico City, referred incorrectly to their origin. While some research suggests a Mayan influence on their architecture, the ethnicity of the builders remains unknown.