

**Anna Rose Alexander.** *City on Fire: Technology, Social Change, and the Hazards of Progress in Mexico City, 1860-1910.* History of the Urban Environment Series. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. 216 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8229-6418-6.

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Nineteenth-century cities were incendiary landscapes. Rapidly growing metropolises like Mexico City faced particular perils thanks to oftentimes slapdash construction. The appearance of new and potentially dangerous buildings, including match factories, textile mills, and theaters, only added to the threat of catastrophic fires that had to be extinguished with bucket brigades before the advent of fire departments equipped with pumps and other specialized tools. In the face of urban growth and modernization, property owners, municipal authorities, and average citizens in Mexico's capital recognized that some kind of systematic response would be necessary to protect their lives and property. Political and economic instability made such an endeavor all but impossible in the first half of the century, but that changed once Porfirio Díaz came to power in 1876. For the rest of the century and into the first decade of the next, administrative reforms and private-sector innovation brought professional firefighting, as well as modern municipal codes, medicine, and indemnity practices, to Mexico City.

This is the story that Anna Rose Alexander tells in *City on Fire: Technology, Social Change, and the Hazards of Progress in Mexico City, 1860-1910*. The first chapters trace the development of an official firefighting apparatus in re-

sponse to the city's changing urban environment. Initially, municipal leaders hoped that civic-minded men from the upper classes would volunteer for duty as part-time firefighters. Although Alexander does not specifically mention it, this scheme echoed the voluntary militias—often headed by these selfsame elite males—that conferred honor on their members. Whether because militias represented more attractive propositions or simply because the hard, sooty work of firefighting did not appeal to the comfortable classes, the volunteer brigades never thrived. In quintessential Porfirian fashion, city administrators concluded they should emulate their counterparts in the United States and Europe by forming a full-time professional firefighting corps kitted out with European-style uniforms and imported machinery. Alexander shows that firefighters sometimes came under suspicion for filching property from victims or using antiquated tactics but that they often succeeded in their primary duty of saving citizens' lives and property.

One of the book's key analytic strengths is Alexander's ability to enfold the history of fire with that of technology and professional expertise. She examines the appearance of safety-minded building codes, including the 1888 municipal legislation that addressed theaters, whose admix-

ture of electric lights, combustible film, and large crowds could all too easily lead to tragedy. With new regulations came new building inspectors drawn from the ranks of the ubiquitous *ingeniero*, those educated professionals so emblematic of the Porfiriato. Alexander shows that, like the firefighters themselves, inspectors both mitigated potential disaster and ignited passive resistance. Another set of experts employed by the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Company plotted maps intended for use by actuaries in Mexico City and a few towns in the north of the country. Another species of would-be engineers invented their own firefighting apparatuses, which, as Alexander points out, undermines the commonplace historiographic assumption that Mexico passively consumed foreign technologies without developing its own.

The final chapters address the new sectors that addressed the aftereffects of fire: insurance companies willing to write policies that covered property loss; and medical specialists who cared for burn victims. Alexander shows that the insurance companies not only modernized Mexico's financial services sector but sometimes also appropriated the role of moral arbiter, scolding property holders for failing to take preventative steps. This was not necessarily a purely humanitarian stance, as Alexander shows, since insurers also tried to shift the blame to victims or resort to technicalities to avoid paying claims. On the human side of the equation, burn victims represented a small but palpable proportion of trauma patients in Mexico City, enough that some doctors followed the most recent medical advances in professional journals. Alexander shows that one physician attempted a skin graft in 1870 after reading about the technique in a medical journal, although the patient in question suffered from advanced-stage gangrene rather than burns. (One graft did take, but the patient died nevertheless.) Not all medical treatments followed the most modern practices, however. Home care for burn

victims often made use of traditional approaches and balms to alleviate victims' suffering.

*City on Fire* starts from a deceptively straightforward focus on firefighting in Mexico City during the era in which industry, electricity, and an emergent working class made it a more densely populated and flammable place. Alexander quickly strides beyond the flames themselves, however, to engage issues of technology, expertise, and the advent of palliative measures, such as insurance and medicine. The book is published as part of the University of Pittsburgh Press's series in urban environmental history, and Alexander succeeds admirably not only in painting the sorts of environmental dangers posed by technological modernization and urban growth but also in describing citizens' growing awareness of the threat posed by fire. We learn how market vendors' negligence with open flame or lumber could lead to tragedy, of the dangers caused by nitrate film base, and many other facets of the combustible cityscape. We learn less about how fire—and the efforts to mitigate its threat—actually transformed that cityscape, however. Alexander expends relatively little attention on questions of city planning, or the fate of areas reduced by fire, or the extent to which new construction did or did not take fire safety into account. On the other hand, she does pause to consider the expanding water infrastructure and how piping and the placement of hydrants favored wealthy districts over poor ones.

*City on Fire* will find a broad readership among historians interested in the history of Mexico City, the urban environment, medicine, and of course fire itself. Historians of technology will find a particularly rich discussion. Rather than treating technology such as firefighting equipment as an extrinsic factor whose arrival in Mexico was responsible for creating historical change, Alexander shows that municipal authorities and experts imported the technologies they found most valuable, ignored those practices and de-

vices they had no use for, and invented those they could not find elsewhere. Her exemplary discussion to the interplay of domestic and foreign knowledge points the way to a practice-based approach to technology—one that suggests that, in matters of life and death, efficacy tends to trump national and conceptual boundaries.

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