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**RESIDENCIA SEMILLA:
REGENERATING MEXICO
CITY'S CANAL NACIONAL
THROUGH A PARTICIPATORY
DESIGN PROGRAMME**

28 August 2018

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Residencia Semilla is a two-week participatory design programme organized by [Design Your Action \(DYA\)](#) in coordination with [Edmundo Lopez de la Rosa Foundation](#), under the banner of the local [World Design Capital Mexico City 2018](#) programme. From 13-24 August 2018, local citizens and interdisciplinary team of designers and experts in various fields gathered at the Instituto Pedagógico Iberoamericano in Mexico City (Mexico) to foster dialogue around the clean up of the Canal Nacional - a 12 kilometer water channel located in the east center of Mexico City.

As part of its Co-living series, World Design Organization had the opportunity to collect impressions and points of views from different stakeholders involved in this residency programme to learn more about the effect of this initiative on the communities' desire to create a more sustainable environment within the city.

A historical site with a strong heritage

The Canal Nacional is the oldest and only existing artificial open-air channel in Mexico City. Until the 1950s, this pre-Hispanic waterway produce, merchandise and building materials to the city center. Mexico City was originally built on water but most of the rivers and canals were closed from the 1950 in order to create more streets and roads. In 1993, local authorities tried to close the Canal Nacional to build another road, but local residents and associations fought against it.

The area around the canal is densely populated and is home to several businesses and industries and on one side, the canal links to the [UNESCO World Heritage Site of Xochimilco](#), located 28 km south of Mexico City. On the edge of the residual lake of Xochimilco, some chinampas ('floating' gardens) can also still be found.

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Picture of the canal “before”



A portion of the canal “today” that has already witnessed the benefits of the regeneration efforts

Protecting the environment through a multidisciplinary community initiative

Faced with an environmental challenge, [Design Week Mexico](#) and the two founders of Design Your Action – [Claudia Garduño](#) and [Xaviera Sánchez de la Barquera Estrada](#) – conceived an initiative that would help raise awareness, as well as present design solutions.

A preliminary workshop was organized with local community members and consisted of a series of activities that culminated with the local community writing letters to the residents to express their concerns about the preservation of the flora and fauna. From this pre-workshop, the Residencia Semilla residency programme was born.

Residencia Semilla – which translates into Seed Residency – is an initiative that celebrates diversity and encourages dialogue and collaboration to generate actionable “seed projects”.



Citizens were seen as local experts and hosted a group of visiting experts formed mainly by designers and architects, but also biologists, archaeologists and lawyers. This diverse group met with the aim of identifying opportunity areas and envisioning a better future.

“ It is a participatory design programme that seeks to foster dialogue and collaboration between citizens and interdisciplinary teams of designers and experts in various subjects. It is expected to have creative proposals that enhance local efforts with respect to two main challenges: mobility design and design for water sustainability.

Claudia Garduño, co-founder, Design Your Action



Cleaning the canal, one segment at a time

The initiative focuses on different projects of short, medium and long scales to protect, preserve and regenerate the Canal Nacional, seen as a socio-environmental unit.

1. *Canal Nacional es* “Canal Nacional is” is a project that will start by making the current efforts more visible and facilitate the integrations of new members and initiatives. It is formed by different “channels” (digital and analogous), dedicated to participation and communication.

2. *Nodos* “Nodes” identifies a series of unused and underused infrastructural elements that are connected by the canal and that can become microhabitats for the communities that live along Canal Nacional. In the short term, connectable structures can be built to host ephemeral events, and moved accordingly. In the medium term, existing bridges can be made wider in order to host different kind of

celebratory and economic activities, increasing the sense of security in the area. In the long term, bigger investment could allow for the regeneration of old spaces such as turning an abandoned treatment plant into a cultural space and observation tower.

3. *Cuicacalli* (a Nahuatl word that refers to meeting spaces where social classes disappear) is a project idea that aims to generate citizen observatories, where knowledge can be generated and spread.

4. *Refugio* “Shelter” considers the canal as a shelter both for humans and other species, as well as for memories and culture. A series of artistic interventions, such as painting aquatic fauna within zebra crossings, would depict how (not too long ago) people used to move through water in their canoes.

Challenges and hopes ahead

The final proposal and the results of the two weeks of workshops were presented to a jury formed by [Fomento Cultural Banamex](#), people from the office of design for inclusive and sustainable streets in México and a local authority representative.



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“ As an architect and urban planner, the experience was most gratifying. It is a project that has all the elements and potential for excellent new urban design; public space, environment, nature, walkable and bicycle mobility, public space and most importantly the consensus from the various groups of neighbors. It is a vibrant community that respects the importance and history of Canal Nacional as a heritage that has to be preserved.

Marco Coello, Deputy Director, Design Week Mexico.

The real challenge is now to get the authorities on board and to raise enough funds to resume the cleaning process but the residency programme has already set a precedent.

“ It brought together very different kinds of people who, in this city, are not used to collaborating side by side. Further than working together, they have lived and laughed together for a couple of weeks. Participants have mentioned that this has been a life changing experience.

Claudia Garduño, co-founder, Design Your Action

Canal Nacional is a vibrant ecological and social refuge from the city that can be useful as an example for other places in the city that need to generate a hydric conscience for creating a better quality of life for all living species and humans.



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ABOUT DESIGN YOUR ACTION

Design Your Action is a non-governmental organization focused on participatory design that seeks community activation to improve the quality of life and collective-environmental welfare. It was co-founded by Claudia Garduño and Xaviera Sánchez de la Barquera Estrada

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