

A City of 2 Million Without a Map

SOMEWHERE IN this lakeside Central American town, there's a woman who lives beside a yellow car. But it's not her car. It's her address. If you were to write to her, this is where you would send the letter: "From where the Chinese restaurant used to be, two blocks down, half a block toward the lake, next door to the house where the yellow car is parked, Managua, Nicaragua."

Try squeezing that onto the back of a postcard. Come to that, try putting yourself in the place of the letter carriers who have to deliver such unruly epistles. How, for example, would they know where the Chinese restaurant used to be if it isn't there anymore? How would they know which way is "down," considering that "down," as employed by people in these parts, could as easily mean "up"?

How would they know which way the lake lies, when most of the time—in this topsy-turvy capital, punctured by the tall green craters of half a dozen ancient volcanoes—they cannot even see the lake? Finally, how would they know where the yellow car is parked, if its owner happens to be out for a spin?

Somehow, the people who live here have figured these things out. Granted, they've had practice. After all, most Managua street addresses take this cumbersome and inscrutable form. "We don't have a real street map," concedes Manuel Estrada Borge, vice president of the Nicaragua Chamber of Commerce, "so we have an amusing little system that no one from anywhere else can understand."

Welcome to Managua, quite possibly the only place on Earth where upward of 2 million people manage to live, work, and play—not to mention find their way around—in a city where the streets have no names.

No numbers, either. Well, that isn't quite true. A few Managua streets do indeed have conventional names. Some houses even have numbers. But no one

hereabouts ever uses them. Why bother? Managuans have their own amusing little system to sort these matters out, a system that has the amusing little side-effect of driving most visitors crazy.

"For people who've just come here," says a long-time Canadian resident of the city, "there's no way on God's Earth that they'd know what you're talking about."

What Managuans are talking about, when all is said and done, is an earthquake that shattered this city three decades ago. Before that time, Managua was an urban conglomeration much like any other, at least in the sense that it had a recognizable center. It also had streets that ran east and west or north and south, and those streets not infrequently bore names. And numbers.

But then, on Dec. 23, 1972, the seismological fault lines that zigzag beneath Managua shifted and buckled, with horrific results. Upward of 20,000 people were killed in the quake, and the city was pretty much reduced to rubble. The catastrophe thoroughly disrupted the old grid pattern of Managua's streets, so the city's surviving residents were obliged to devise a new way of locating things. They started with a landmark—a certain tree, for example, or a pharmacy or a plaza or a soft-drink bottling plant—and they went from there.

Nowadays, for example, if you wished to visit the small Canadian Consulate in Managua, you would present yourself at the following address: *De Los Pipitos, dos cuerdas abajo*. In English, this means: From Los Pipitos, two blocks down.

Any self-respecting inhabitant of Managua knows that "Los Pipitos" refers to a child-welfare agency whose headquarters are located a little south of the Tiscapa Lagoon. Managuans also know that *abajo*, in this context, does not mean "down" in a topographical sense. It means "west," because the sun goes down in the west. (By the same to-

ken, in Managua street talk, "*arriba*," or "up," means "east." *Al lago*, which literally means "to the lake," is how Managuans say "to the north." For some inexplicable reason, when they want to say "to the south," Managuans say "*al sur*," which means "to the south.")

Just to make a complicated process even more perplexing, Managuans, who normally use the metric system, will often give directions by employing an ancient Spanish unit of measurement called the *vara*. They will say, "From the little tree, two blocks to the south, 50 *varas* to the east." Visitors will therefore need to know how long a *vara* is (0.847 meters). They will also need to know that the "little tree" is no longer little. It is actually quite tall.

A few years ago, the Nicaraguan postal agency considered scrapping the jerry-rigged system of street addresses. But nothing came of the project. Besides, the scheme actually does seem to work. Nedelka Aguilar, for example, has learned that you merely have to have a little faith. Born in Nicaragua, she left as a young girl and spent most of her youth in southern Ontario. Now she lives in Managua once more. Shortly after her return four years ago, she arranged to visit a woman who dwelled at that outlandish address—"From where the Chinese restaurant used to be, two blocks down, half a block toward the lake, next door to the house where the yellow car is parked." By this time, Aguilar spoke the Managua dialect of street addresses well enough to take in the gist of this information. But what about that yellow car?

"I said to the woman, 'How will I find you if the yellow car isn't there?'" Aguilar smiles and shakes her head at the memory. "The woman laughed. She said, 'The yellow car is always there.'"

—OAKLAND ROSS, *The Toronto Star*
(liberal), Toronto, Canada,
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