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Data-driven

JUAN IGNACIO RODRÍGUEZ MAKES RESEARCH A PRIORITY IN LATIN AMERICA

By María Bird Picó

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OT MANY DESIGNERS

can even imagine any similarities between the planning of cemeteries and the planning of shopping centers. But Mexican architect Juan Ignacio Rodríguez, one of this year's recipients of ICSC's Researcher Award, has actually given this considerable thought.

Rodríguez is the partner in charge of the real estate planning division of Mexico City-based MAC Arquitectos Consultores, known for its shopping center designs and its retail real estate market research. But the firm's research business goes well beyond malls.

"Demography is a common denominator when planning a cemetery and a shopping center, since you need to assess the area population and purchasing power," said Rodríguez. "For both, we conduct market surveys, but in the case of a mall's feasibility, we ask where consumers buy things like fruit. For a graveyard, a key question is if they have already made funeral arrangements such as buying a tomb. In both cases, it involves measuring the number of nearby competitors and identifying what they offer, their target markets and prices."

Real estate data is a sometimes hard-to-find and valuable commodity in Mexico. Rodríguez is that country's first researcher to get this award, which ICSC created in 2008 to recognize members who help advance the industry's research and knowledge. "Juan has been instrumental in moving forward the research for Mexico," said Michael P. Niemira, ICSC's chief economist and director of research. "He truly has made a mark and made a difference."

Mexico has at least improved its tracking of comprehensive demo-

graphic data over the past decade, through the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía statistics agency. The last census, conducted in 2010, has generated detailed information useful to retailers and mall owners, including the first inventory of all types of stores that can be broken down by streets. Moreover, the data is available in an easier-to-use Internet format.

But the story is different when it comes to such performance information as sales per square meter or common-area-maintenance fees. Though such information is commonly shared in the U.S., many in Mexico hold this data close to the vest. "Some of the big developers and firms with foreign investors are sharing their information, but we still have a long way to go," said Rodríguez. "Our goal in Mexico's ICSC research



group is to generate as much information as possible. We have moved from the previous approach of 'if you don't give me your data, I won't give you what we have,' to 'here is all the data we have compiled, so please share yours with us.'"

Rodríguez, who was born in Mexico City and still lives there with his wife, Susanne, and their infant daughter, joined MAC Arquitectos Consultores in 2001 as a draftsman. Six months later he moved over to the real estate planning division, manned then by only two people. "The area piqued my interest, since prior to joining the firm, I had worked for a municipality in that field," said Rodríguez. "I love the opportunity to learn from all kinds of people."

Half of the roughly 500 studies the firm's planning division has conducted over the past 20 years have been for shopping centers of various sizes and shapes, says Rodríguez. MAC has designed some 40 shopping centers in Mexico, Costa Rica and St. Maarten. The company was founded 65 years ago, when architect Conrado Montaña Aubert founded Grupo MAC, which became MAC Arquitectos Consultores. Montaña Aubert, the father of current MAC partner Gonzalo Montaña Estrada, had a small firm with only five architects but which designed a diversity of structures in Mexico and the Caribbean. The father advised his son to begin his career at another firm, believing that this would help give him a valuable breadth of knowledge and experience. The young man went along with the idea and chose Legorreta Arquitectos, one of Mexico's most prestigious architecture firms. "The [three-year-long] experience with Legorreta was extraordinary," recalled Montaña Estrada, who was chairman of ICSC's Mexico advisory board between 2010 and 2012. "My father offered me the opportunity to learn things that I could apply to the family firm."

Montaña Estrada started the sister

real estate market research firm in 1992 to help developers determine the size of a market and a project and to measure the wealth of the population. In recent years the firm has helped investors with no experience in real estate development find sites, anchor stores and financing. "Mexico's real estate industry is highly competitive, with plenty of capital available for development," said Rodríguez. "Aside from an oversupply of GLA in

certain markets, there are others where the real estate offer is still low. The secret is to measure well what types of products are still unavailable. You must think outside the box with an innovative development that offers a unique tenant mix with the goal of changing the entertainment and consumption habits of the consumers in the target area."

That's not as easy as planning a cemetery.

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