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A new

In Cancún, two architects are using rental apartments to reinvigorate



Lease

a neighborhood deteriorating in the shadow of exclusive beach resorts.

TEXT BY
Natalia Torija

PHOTOS BY | @CESARBEJARSTUDIO
César Béjar



In 2015, architect Victor Ebergenyi Kelly had his dream job (albeit a bureaucratic one) working in public housing and urban redevelopment in Mexico City when he got a call that would change the course of his career. It was from his former thesis adviser, Juan Carral O’Gorman, who asked Ebergenyi to join him in Cancún. Carral was working on a project in a struggling part of the coastal city, a world away from the nearby glittering seaside resorts, and he wanted Ebergenyi’s help.

Carral’s focus was Donceles, a working-class neighborhood of 1,161 homes, developed in the 1980s by the Mexican national housing institution, Infonavit, for hospitality workers. Even when new, the area had plenty of troubles: Pedestrian walkways were left unpaved, there wasn’t much shade in public spaces, and the residences were bare-bones, with mere four-inch concrete walls. “In this heat and without insulation, the houses are like furnaces,” says Ebergenyi. “Many people sleep outside.” Hurricanes Gilbert in 1988 and Wilma in 2005 hit the area hard, and Donceles fell into serious disrepair. Trash wasn’t getting picked up. Public money was funneled into tourism and hospitality, with little left for low-income housing. By 2010, 194 Donceles homes had been left abandoned.

Carral had spent much of his childhood in Cancún and moved back from Barcelona in 2009. A meal at a popular restaurant in the area got the architect to begin thinking about ways to bring investment back into Donceles. He tried to get funding for a few projects, but it wasn’t until his lawyer cousin Juan O’Gorman Merino (both are grandkids of the 20th-century Mexican architect and painter Juan O’Gorman) joined him that things started to take off. With O’Gorman’s investment, they devised a market-driven plan to revitalize the neighborhood. They would redevelop abandoned lots into apartment buildings, finance new businesses, and use the profits to improve public spaces. The apartments would provide comfortable but modest living spaces for young people that the rest of the city’s housing market largely ignored, and the team would work with the neighbors and the local government to try to find solutions to problems like flooding and waste management. “In the long run,” Carral says, “we believe that if there is a strong community that embraces its spaces and benefits, most residents will prefer to stay and be proud to live in Donceles.”

Domus Feli, Domus Peepem, and Domus Vulpes

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DESIGNERS **Kiltro Polaris, JC Arquitectura, and Wewi Studio**
LOCATION **Cancún, Mexico**



“The model is to rent half of the units long-term to people looking for a small, functional, and flexible space, and half for short-term vacation rentals,” says Pablo Gutiérrez de la Peza, the former business partner of O’Gorman Merino (who died in 2020). The units, the team says, are not meant to rehouse local residents, much less to displace them, but rather to create an improved environment that includes them. “In each development we invest around 5 percent of the total cost in infrastructure and public space, and we allocate the same percentage of the net operating income for public improvements,” says >

Architects Victor Ebergenyi Kelly and Juan Carral O’Gorman have designed a series of mixed-use buildings meant to revitalize the Donceles neighborhood of Cancún, Mexico. The new structures are mostly built on previously abandoned lots, and 5 percent of the net operating income generated from renting spaces to residents, travelers, and small businesses is invested in public improvements.



DWELLINGS

Paloma Flores Herrero and Patricio Manzo have an apartment on the third floor of Domus Peepem (below). Their design firm, Wewi Studio, has its office on the ground floor (right) and worked on the building's interiors. "There's a practicality that goes with the kind of place we are living in and the way we work," Paloma says. "I understand why some people may not like the aesthetic, with things like unfinished ceilings," Leonardo Alfaro (opposite) says, "but I love it."



Gutiérrez. Carral started with a six-unit building, and the team went on to construct 11 more, including some small single-family homes. Ten more are now under development. Most are built on previously abandoned lots. The group has invested in public basketball courts and lighting, among other things; and Carral, Ebergenyi, and Carlos del Castillo, another local architect, are working with the municipality to create a walkable sidewalk around the area.

It's critical to the team that they not disturb old residents when bringing in new ones. "The challenge is to locate the people with rights to the unoccupied land and its legal situation," Gutiérrez says. "We have found owners who never finished paying their mortgages or who did not cancel them. Others lost their titles, live in the surrounding cities, or died, so it's necessary to locate their heirs. Many owe property taxes or water and electricity bills for several years. We help them with the necessary procedures to regularize their property, and then they can sell it to us through a public deed before a notary."

When Ebergenyi joined, he added a level of sophistication to the schemes that the first buildings sacrificed for cost. Prefabricated breeze-blocks replaced hollow block construction, and plywood in the kitchens was replaced with moisture-resistant particle board finished with melamine.

The buildings stand in stark contrast to the nearby shark fin-shaped skyscrapers and private canals of the new Puerto Cancún luxury development, whose owners immediately put up a wall along one of the main streets of Donceles, cutting the neighborhood off from a private golf course and local access to the public beach. >





Ebergenyi (left and opposite) lives in Domus Feli and runs his practice, Kiltro Polaris, from an office in another building he designed in the area. Musician Antonio Kawage and designer Lucía Govela collaborate in a simple work space in Domus Feli (above). The building's stairwell (right) is utilitarian but elegant, with details like breeze-block walls, built-in planters, and handrails made of construction rods finished in an anticorrosive, mint-green polymer coating.



When I visited Donceles in June, I spoke to many new residents as well as longtime locals about the developments. They shared a cautious optimism. Jimena Mendoza, a graphic designer who rents a space for her ceramics work, was concerned that the developments could increase property values and hurt locals in the long run. Josue Gabilondo, who runs a photography studio not far from Mendoza's space, said that he had seen a lot of skepticism from locals but that the real concern was the luxury towers next door.

Eric, a 60-year-old construction worker who has been living in Donceles for 25 years (and, like a few residents, prefers not to give his last name), echoes that sentiment. He says he is less worried about the new developments than about the 700 or so construction workers coming in and out of Puerto Cancún because he's seen them harass women on the street. When I ask about the developments in Donceles, he says, "At some point, this neighborhood has to flourish. I think they're all right."

While making sure her Chihuahua stays

inside, Irma, a former educator whose house survived the two big hurricanes, says, "The municipality never even looks at us. I think the new developments are very pretty."

"This is social housing in the sense that it gives something back to society," says Ebergenyi. "In Mexico, social housing is known as small, ugly housing on the outskirts. No, social housing should be intra-urban housing that solves a problem for people."

Coincidentally or not, most of the new residents I spoke with had recently undergone some sort of transformation in their lives. Whether working from home or spending time outside and interacting with the community, they seem to find solace and a sense of belonging here.

"I brought my bed and a pouf, and that was it," Gustavo Macías Serno says. He recently moved out of a shared two-bedroom apartment, started a new job in the granite and marble industry, and moved to one of the smaller units in a tower called Domus Peepem. "I am new to the concept of minimalism," he says. "I have

a hammock that I sometimes bring up to the roof and hang for a little while, especially at night." Every morning he goes for a walk on the beach and meditates on a dock. It's all part of a "liberation and healing process" he is going through after a recent breakup.

Across the hall from Gustavo, Leonardo Alfaro, a graphic designer working in video production and photography, is leading a modern monk lifestyle.

"I have a very strict routine," he says. "I get up at 5:20 a.m. to go train for long-distance running. I come back, shower, meditate, write gratitude notes, and make myself a cup of coffee. I look at a couple of references online that inspire me, and I start working. At 5 p.m. I finish work, and everything else is recreational. I read, watch a video, and I go to bed early to start again."

Both Macías and Alfaro pay 8,500 MXN a month (about \$420), which is considered high in a city where the average monthly income is around \$2,000. But the project's studios and one-bedroom apartments are relatively rare finds across the city. >

“Where there is density, public space is occupied. We can’t build small dwellings with no quality public areas.”

VICTOR EBERGENYI KELLY, ARCHITECT AND RESIDENT



DWELLINGS

Lofted beds, like the one Beatriz Zurita is sitting on (below), make room in tight spaces. Yissel Nolasco Reyes (right, on left, with friend Anahí Alvarenga), who works at Kiltro Polaris and helped design Domus Vulpes, says of the building she lives in, “We all know each other around here. Not just the new tenants but also the locals.” The buildings include commercial spaces such as Bar Primo on the ground floor of Domus Peepem (opposite).



“This is a minimal dwelling project, something that doesn’t exist in Cancún, where two-bedroom homes reign, as if no one lived any other way!” Carral says. “Here, we brought the bachelor, the divorced, the student, the young couple, the vacation rental, all the market that doesn’t belong to the typical two-bedroom home.”

Both Carral and Ebergenyi live in their Donceles projects—Carral in a building named Donceles 35, finished in 2018, in a unit with a mezzanine bedroom overlooking the golf course. “We have created a business out of solving a problem,” he says. “The idea is to migrate this idea to other Mexican cities. I’ve always thought we need guerrilla architects that go from one neighborhood to the next convincing people in favor of a common good.”

The area has its challenges, trash pickup and the growing cat population among them, but Ebergenyi and Carral are working on them. “They all have made us realize the shortcomings we have as a country and as a society,” Ebergenyi says. “Windows of opportunity, if you want to see it that way.”

The architects are quickly learning as they go. Plans for a ground-floor garage in the first building were reconsidered in the following ones, giving way to commercial spaces like the buoyant Bar Primo and one of the best *cevicherías* in the city, with more establishments to come.

Walking around the neighborhood early in the morning, I was met with many cries of *buenos días* from neighbors and even from the local wildlife—the coatis came out of the nearby mangrove trees to say hi. Coexistence is key, and it may take a while to see what effect the new neighbors will have on the old. Here, the goal is that the changes benefit both. ■

